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VOLUME SIX | JUNE, 1935 | NUMBER ONE

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Last Chance Courage

HARDPAN PARKER didn't start to get good and mad until the third time he had read the printed injunction that was nailed to the joists of the mine entrance. Then he turned and bellowed for his partner. In the little canvas and log shack Nevada George lay down the skillet, grabbed up a Winchester and sloped out to see what new hell was a-cooking at their Last Chance mine. And at the same minute, a paunchy, officious-looking deputy stalked from around the corner of the shaft-head.

He came swiftly, as if he were half expecting trouble. His star glittered bravely on his vest; his right hand was near his gun butt.

"Tough luck, boys," he called. "Court's just ruled that this vein you've been workin' belongs to the Paramount Minin' Company. But don't feel too bad; I hear they're takin' on some more men. Likely you could git yorselfs jobs there."

That was an unfortunate remark for the officer to make. The two old miners acted in perfect unison, as they had for the past twenty years. Nevada George prodded the muzzle of the rifle into the fat deputy's brisket; Hardpan Parker ripped off the offending notice from the post, crumpled it up and jammed it in the deputy's face.

"Now, while yo're chawin' on that, mister, I'll say my own piece: If we was dyin' neither George or me would work for that Paramount outfit. We're workin' for ourselves, as we have been most of our lives. Sweatin', fightin', starvin' sometimes, because we got faith in the claim we filed on; because we own it, regardless of what any long-eared judge in some dusty court-room may say. We own this land, damn yore bones, an' you nor nobody can take it away from us, or stop us from workin' it. Now, fog!"

The deputy spat and spluttered. "I'll be back!" he swore.

"C'mon, Nevada," said Hardpan. "I got a hunch we're goin' to strike it lucky today. . . . " They disappeared down into their mine. . . .

The deputy did come back, with a dozen men armed with rifles. And nowhere in the annals of the silver-mining frontier is there as stirring a courage saga as the story of those two old partners who, forted up in the mine mouth, withstood the siege put up by the hired deputies of the Paramount Mining Company.

Food ran low; they subsisted on another notch in their belts; bullets found their way into the mouth of the mine; they laughed and sent back as good as they got. Hardpan caught a slug that tore off most of his ear, but he doused it with whisky, cursed some and fought on.

Nevada scratched his head, lined his sights on a moving figure dodging behind a jutting cluster of rocks. "Hardpan, I'm goin' out. Listen: I used to know Lawyer Bill Stewart in Virginia City. He can stop this foolishment once and for all. Right now it looks like we'll either be starved out or leaded down. You mebbe can hold 'em off for another two days. By that time I'll be back with all the writs an' injunctions we need. . . ."

Hardpan's protest that he be allowed to take the risks met with no success. Before he started to crawl out, Nevada said, "Promise me thet you'll stick, Hardpan. We stuck together now for a mighty long time. We both believe that the Last Chance'll prove up a bonanza sometime. Stick with it, old-timer. I'll be back. . . . "

A quick hand-clasp, and he snaked out. Out there in the night spurts of red lashed from the deputies' guns. Hardpan strained his ears fearing that above the spasmodic rifle cracks there would come the scream of his partner, dying. . . .

He wiped the bloody grime and cold sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "He said he'd come back," Hardpan whispered. "He told me so. An' he ain't gone back on his word, ever. . . .

Two days later, they found Hardpan, bullet-bitten, blood-stained, uncon-

scious in the mine-mouth, behind the hastily-filled sacks of slag that he and Nevada had used as a barricade. The Paramount bunch had won—but it was an empty victory. For even while that siege was in progress, other forces were in action; in the State capitol the appelate court neatly reversed the decision that there was but one silver vein in Big Blue Mountain. The Paramount company was shoved back . . . and the Last Chance mine was still the property of Nevada and Hardpan.

But Nevada had not come back. Hardpan got in touch with Bill Stewart, to find that the old miner had not been seen in Virginia City. Could he have been killed, Hardpan wondered, his boney form shrunken and weakened by the rigors of that four-day battle. But no body of Nevada George had been found. . . . "All right," Hardpan muttered to himself, "I'll just keep things ready for him when he does come. He said he would."

It took another silver strike over on Gallows Creek to empty the little mining settlement that had nestled at the foot of Big Blue Mountain. Men and women, desert rats, mining engineers, capitalists and promoters tracked to the golconda that was Gallows. And the little side-hill city of canvas and wood became tenanted by only the howling bitter winds of winter and the memories of the raw, teeming life it once had known.

Visions of the riches lying in wait for him in Gallows Creek rose at night to plague Hardpan. But there would ring in his ears his partner's last words, "Stick with the mine, Hardpan . . . I'll be back. . . ."

The second winter he was alone, Hardpan glanced up into the lowering sky. He shook his head, remembering for the past few weeks that the only sign of animals around there had been the eerie howls of the coyotes. A starvation winter was coming, by the looks of things. . . .

After the first lashing storms had whipped down from the top of Big Blue, half wrecking the little shack, Hardpan salvaged what he could of the boards and canvas and once more holed up in the shelter of the mine mouth. His food was getting perilously low again; he had lived for almost a year on what he could trap and the fresh meat he could shoot.

And then came those dark, disastrous months that locked the West in an icy coat; that froze out settlers, ruined cattlemen and halted all work excepting in the biggest mines. Hardpan watched his meager rations diminish day by day; cut down his food to just enough to keep life in his body. And the heartless lash of the storms kept up their dirge. . . .

It was black inside there—black and cold. Half frozen, Hardpan turned fever-bright eyes toward the homemade door. Could that be something besides the wind that shook the planks? Some animal, perhaps, which, buffeted by the storm, had sought shelter there? Weakly Hardpan staggered up, threw his puny strength toward getting that heavy door swung to. And fell back unconscious as the first blast of the blizzard whipped in.

He didn't know then that Nevada had come back; was leaning over him, shouting directions to the rest of the search party. He didn't know until later that Nevada had almost made it to Virginia City with a cruel head-wound; that the bullet had laid his old partner up for two years, crazed and half paralyzed, but at the first chance Nevada had made his way back again with a grub-stake, secured by the Last Chance itself—not for its silver vein, but in the near-certainty that it was rich in copper.

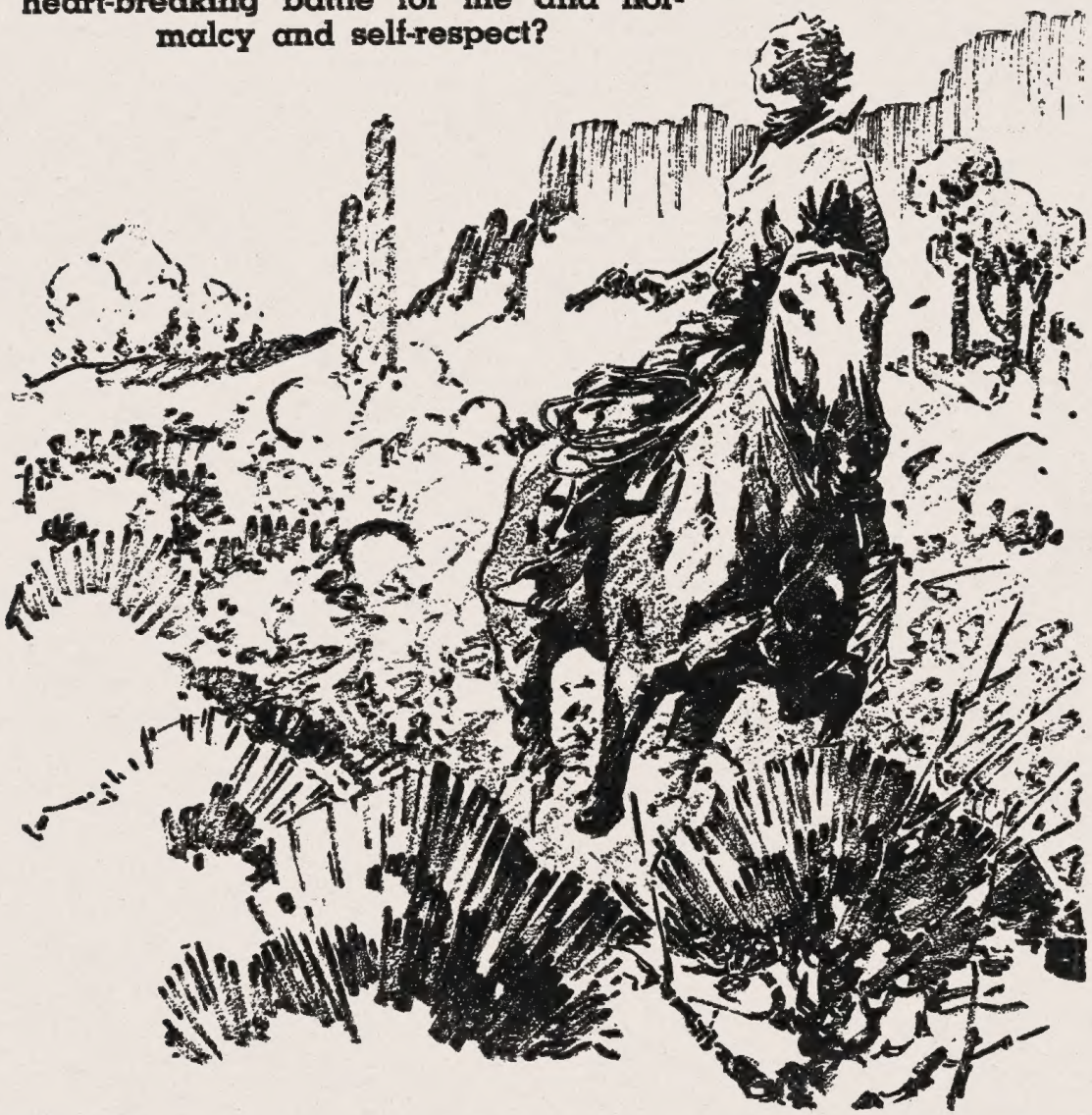
They leased the mine to the copper company. They'd never sell the Last Chance. And now, half way up the bleak sides of the Big Blue is a snug cabin; comfortable and well-equipped, with enough food to last through any winter. There, on summer days the two partners like to sit, looking into the sunset. And with them are, like as not, others; desert-rats, hard-rock men, miners all, who have stuck by their guns and their partners; who have learned their lesson in the same, rigorous, grim school, and are now reaping their rewards of Last Chance courage.

—THE MAVERICK

By OLIVER KING

The BREAKING

A helpless, embittered cripple, Buck McGee, one-time ruler of a rangeland empire, bitterly cursed his friends, himself and his God. Would the seeds of hate engendered by the man he once called friend yield only the empty harvest of early, tragic death? Or would they spur him, by their gnawing pain, to one more heart-breaking battle for life and normalcy and self-respect?



BUCK paused outside the little shack and looked at it, his mouth tightening. It was a nasty job he had to do. He didn't like it. For a moment he was near to giving it up, taking the easier way—back to the other lighted building where the strains of dance music and the innocent, friendly jollity of the valley folk invited him.

It was not because Cree Bucknell and his lieutenant, Pinto Allen, were in there that he hesitated. They were about as safe to handle as a pair of full-grown diamond backs. But it was something else that plucked at Buck, pulling him back—it was the code of the West, of his breed, that every man has a right to go to hell in his own way, providing he's not

# of BUCK McGEE

A Novel of the Cattle Frontier

bothering anybody else.

Jack Harmon was in that shack, playing cards with a pair who were as near to being hydrophobia skunks as anything that walked on two legs could be. And Jack was Buck's friend—his partner.

Buck's stubby finger-ends drummed on the gun-butt at his thigh and he swore softly. He could imagine the scene inside—the three seated at the small pine table, the slow-moving shadows from the lamp hanging on its chain from the roof beam; Jack nonchalant, handsome, trying to give his dark young face the hard, careless look which would impress these two renegades, the others buttering him along to take his money and, possibly, to make some other use of him.

Which, according to the code, was Harmon's own business.

"Hell! He's nothin' but a kid," Buck muttered. His jaw set and he strode up to the door, lifted the latch and stepped in.

The up-flick of the strangers' glances was swift, immediate. Their eyes bored at him as he stepped through the door—eyes veiled by a surface casualness but sharp, beneath that, with the tense alertness of the hunted, of men to whom any footstep is a menace until it is proved otherwise.

Only Jack Harmon failed to look up. He was absorbed in dealing the fourth card of a stud hand.

Buck, leaning against the door, watched, lazy-eyed, while Harmon backed a pair of deuces on the board and lost to kings, one in the hole. Cree Bucknell, swarthy with his Indian blood, thick-set, a cast in one eye, raked in the pot and grinned amiably at the loser. "I was skeered you had two pair," he remarked. Buck saw that he had been winning steadily. Bills and silver were piled in front of him.

Pinto Allen growled, "You got the luck of the devil." He reached in his pocket and pulled out several bills which he laid in front of him. "But I'm gonna take you for a cleanin' before I'm through," he added belligerently.

Harmon grinned. "Look out I don't beat you to it," he put in. "I got a hunch it's my night to howl."

Buck drawled, "Yeah—amongst the ladies. What about comin' on over to the dance, Jack? Everybody's lookin' for you." There was an undercurrent of significance in his tone. The two strangers looked up at him again, suddenly, hard-eyed.

"Not me," Harmon said, carelessly. "I got to relieve these gents of their dinero first."

Buck's eyes were steady and a little puzzled as he looked at the dark, handsome face of this youngster who was his friend. Couldn't he see what he was up against?

Cree Bucknell said in a tone which carried the hint of a warning. "Never try to break up a good poker game, amigo. Set in if you want to."

Buck disregarded him, and addressed himself to Harmon again. "Sittin' in the middle of three-handed stud with two strangers ain't a good way to get rich, Jack. You'd be better off over at the dance."

"What do you mean by that?" Bucknell rasped, getting out of his chair.

"What I say," Buck snapped. "If you can't understand it in American, I'll try to talk Mex for you—or Cree." The indolent lids of his eyes flicked wide as he spoke, exposing eyes whose blue had the glitter and chill of glacier ice.

Pinto Allen, a lean, thin-lipped, gray-faced lobo with eyes so pale that the pupils looked like black pinheads against clouded marble, dropped his hand unobtrusively toward his off-thigh where a six-gun hung, tied low.

"Keep your hand on the table, you!" Buck rapped out at him. "Or your luck'll get worse sudden!"

For the space of a heart-beat, time stopped, prolonged itself into a frozen infinity. The Cree's face—a little fat, scarred from chin to eye-corner, purpled. His elbows lifted a fraction of an inch as the gun-tension flooded visibly into his scarred, stocky hands.

BUCK had stepped free of the door. He was standing easily, legs spread a little, weight on his toes, right hand dangling limp by the holstered gun-butt on his thigh.

"If you feel lucky, go ahead," he said softly. His frozen blue gaze locked with the other's. In the half-breed's eyes there

was hesitation—sudden caution, calculation, a hint of fear. Then, whether he decided that he preferred not to risk his draw against Buck's or whether he thought it wouldn't be healthy to kill one of the valley men, his posture relaxed. He was about to speak when Jack Harmon came to life.

"What call you got to come in here an' insult a couple of gents I'm playin' cards with, Buck?" he demanded angrily.

"Be hard to insult 'em, I reckon," Buck drawled deliberately. "Don't be a damn' fool, Jack. You don't want to sit in a game with men like this. Come on out of it—we're gonna the dance."

Harmon got to his feet, his dark young face flushed a deep red.

"The hell we're gonna dance!" he snarled. "You think because your paw rode herd on this valley, you can do it, too! Well, listen, mealy-mouth, go play nurse to the wimmen an' kids. Me, I been weaned."

The two men at the table laughed. "That's tellin' it, son," Bucknell grinned approvingly. "I reckon you're plumb growed up, at that."

Buck stared at Jack Harmon and fought his temper. It was boiling up in him at this unexpected slap in the face from the boy he thought was his friend. Yet that insulting remark, while it increased his anger, helped him to control himself. Old Mike McGee had successfully fought his own temper through a life-time in which it was often hard pressed. And he had taught Buck to do the same. The folk of Thunder Valley had to live together in peace, or go out in some sudden red hell of war. The valley, fertile as a cattleman's dream of heaven, was outside the law, far from any town, dependent on itself. For years, Mike McGee, owner of the biggest and richest spread and one of the first settlers, had ruled the colony like a king—by virtue of sheer honesty, fairness and fearlessness. Budding feuds, which might have ended anywhere, were apt to wither under the blast of Mike's hearty common sense or his chill disapproval.

And at Mike McGee's death, his son, Buck, had inherited not only his money and land but his sense of communal responsibility as well. Just now, what Buck wanted more than anything, was to land his fist on Jack Harmon's jaw. But he set his teeth and resisted the impulse.

Instead, he gritted, "Stay here then," and hung on to himself hard. "Get cleaned out if you haven't any more sense!"

He turned on his heel and walked out, hastily, like a man who was afraid to stay to say, or hear, more.

Outside he paused, breathing a little hard, cooling his hot face in the fresh night air. "Well," he told himself grimly, "You asked for it an' you got it. To hell with him!" Then he turned and walked slowly toward the lighted door of the old log fort, where the dance music still played.

Jud Bentley and grizzled Howler Kirnan, Buck's foreman, lounged near the doorway outside of the building. Howler greeted him with the dry, sardonic grin which Buck was beginning to find a little irritating. It was the grin which the sight of Jack Harmon, or any mention of him, brought to Howler's face ever since that day when the old foreman had presumed to warn Buck against his friend. Buck had called him down, hard, and since then the old cowpoke had kept his lips buttoned, but that grin of his was eloquent of an unchanged opinion.

Jud Bentley, raw-boned, hot-headed, violent, was no man to keep silent. "Well," he remarked jeeringly, "It don't look like he'd decided to come with you."

"No," Buck answered, still a little grim. "He didn't."

"I told you you was fixin' to make a fool of yourself. He's found his own kind at last. Let the skunk go."

"Jack's all right," Buck said stiffly. "It's his business."

"Yeah? A polecat'd be all right if she had a scorpion tail, too. Danged if I see how anybody as smart as you are, Buck, can git taken in by a kid like that. He ain't nothin' but good looks an' foofaraw an' meanness—there ain't any part of him that's—"

"I've told you before that Jack's my friend," Buck cut in sharply. "I'd be obliged to you if you kept it in mind when you was talkin' about him to me."

"I had an idee that you an' me was friends too," Jud said, sore. "But I reckon if you're that took up with this—"

"Let it go, Jud," Buck told him, a little wearily. "You an' me are friends, all right. I wouldn't listen to anybody runnin' you down, either."

HE WENT into the hall, shucked his gun-belt and hung it up, and then went into the dance hall, his eyes searching for Linda Stuart. The edge had gone off of the evening for him. As always, when he was feeling ruffled or a little down-in-the-mouth his mind went directly to her.

The music had stopped and he saw her in a corner, with Ora Cowan bending over her attentively. It was good to see the cool, faintly golden pallor of Linda's face, which scarcely tanned at all. It soothed him, even that first brief glance, as nothing else could have done. It was, he thought as he had thought before a thousand times, like seeing a magnolia blossom in the clear, late light of evening. And above it, the red-gold crown of her hair, like an oval setting for the deep, warm sapphire of the eyes. His breath caught, as always, at the golden loveliness of her head, the slender, strong, curved beauty of her body.

She saw him almost at once—her eyes swinging to him, as though unconsciously magnetized, and full of sudden relief. He wondered if anybody had been fool enough to tell her . . . Not that there had been any danger.

He crossed the room toward her, unconscious of anyone else. In the back of his mind was the contemptuous thought that one of the criticisms people leveled at Jack was the fact that he seemed attracted to Linda. As though anybody but a fool could have helped being drawn to her!

"Where's Jack?" Ora Cowan asked drily. "Doesn't look as though he had come with you."

"No," Buck told him. "He didn't."

Linda said, "You shouldn't have gone over there, Buck." Her blue eyes held a left-over glint of the anxiety she had evidently been under.

"They told you, did they?" Buck asked, a little scornfully.

"Everybody knew," she answered simply. "Why wouldn't Jack come with you?"

Ora Cowan didn't wait for him to answer. "Because he's a born fool—an' maybe a born snake," he said. "Jack would have been run out of this valley long ago, except for Buck."

Buck said stubbornly, "There's nothin' wrong with Jack. He's young, an' he's a little wild, that's all."

"What I want to know," Ora said sourly, "is why that renegade Cree an' his side-kick ain't bein' run out of the valley, or salted down with bullets before now."

Buck shrugged. "They've let us alone, so far. No use borrowin' trouble."

He took Linda off to dance.

"Is it really Cree Bucknell he's over there with?" she asked.

"Looks like him, from his descriptions," Buck told her abstractedly.

"What happened, Buck?"

"Jack an' me quarrelled some. He wouldn't come away from their crooked game."

They danced in silence for awhile, then the girl said, "You seem worried, Buck. Is anything really bad?"

"I guess I am kind of worried," he told her slowly. "I kind of lost my temper over there. Maybe I oughtn't to have—maybe I ought to have stuck an' got him away."

"But if he won't come, there's nothing you can do."

"I could have tried harder, I reckon. In fact, I reckon I showed kind of yeller. You hate to ride herd on another hombre, even if he is pretty much of a kid. So I got into bein' sore."

HE STOPPED dancing, releasing Linda's waist with a suddenly decisive gesture. "I'm goin' back, honey," he said, his mouth tightening, "an' see if I can't make a better job of it."

"Oh, no—don't!' The exclamation escaped her and at Buck's look of wonder she seemed a little confused.

"Why, honey?" The question was as direct as his eyes.

Anxiety was in the gaze she lifted to him. "You might get into a quarrel with Cree Bucknell—and that other man, Pinto Allen," she said candidly. "They're deadly, Buck. You know that. They're killers. You—you might—I mean, there's no telling what might happen."

Buck's eyes hardened. "I reckon they ain't so poisonous as all that. I can take care of myself."

"It isn't that. I know you're best of all the valley men—at everything," she told him. "You've shown that often enough. But—but—do you really think Jack's worth it, Buck?"

He gave her a little crooked smile. "You, too, Linda?" he asked.

She looked confused again, but her eyes when she spoke were candid and honest. "I know he's your friend, Buck, but—I don't trust him. Nobody here does. You're the only one who likes him. Don't you think that maybe you're mistaken? That the rest of us are maybe right?"

"No," he answered stiffening, "I don't." Then because he saw his manner had hurt her, he softened, "Even if I didn't like the kid, honey," he explained, "I'd have to try to get him away from there, just because he's a valley kid. He's a little wild, Jack is. He's heard of Cree Bucknell and his gang an' he don't want to believe that they're the kind of sidewinders they are. He's likely got his head full of fool notions about 'em. It ain't only that they'll take his money—it's that he's more than liable to join up with 'em, thinkin' that they're fine, dashin' outlaws. Or just as bad, he's liable to catch 'em rip-sawin' him in that game an' get himself killed. I got to make another try at gettin' him away."

He turned and walked toward the door. In the hall, he buckled on his gunbelt again and strode out toward the shack. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Bushwhack!

IT WASN'T hard to see, as soon as he stepped into the door, that Jack Harmon had been drinking and that even during the short time since Buck had left him, the liquor had begun to get in its work. His face was flushed and his eyes a little foolish.

The pair with him looked up as before, their eyes hard. "Well, well!" the stocky half-breed jeered. "Here's the ladies' man

back again. Come to play a man's game or do some more preachin'?"

Buck disregarded him. He walked over to Jack and put his hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry we got to jawin' one another, Jack," he said. "We're both valley-men and old friends. Let's go on out an' talk it over—get it straightened out."

"I ain't got anything to straighten out," Harmon told him insolently. "You come in here an' tried to horn into my business an' I told you where to get off. If you got it fixed in your head now that I'm a grown man an' don't need any nurse, why that's all that's needful."

Buck's hand tightened on his shoulder involuntarily as swift, white anger leapt up in him. He hesitated a moment, fighting to keep his tone level. "You're tryin' me pretty high, Jack," he said at length, a little thickly. "Come on out of here an' quit playin' the damn' fool. You got no business playin' cards or havin' anythin' else to do with a couple of sidewinders like this. Come on now—I want to talk to you." Unconsciously, his hand pulled Harmon's shoulder toward him and up, in a gesture of compulsion.

The younger man's face flushed with rage. He slapped the hand from his shoulder and got to his feet.

"You damn', interferin' old woman!" he shouted furiously. "Get the hell out of here an' let me alone—I'm warnin' you!"

Buck stared, divided between unbelief and anger. "What I ought to do is to slap you down, you half-witted young puppy," he said dangerously. "An' either you walk out of here with me, *now,* or I will."

"By God, I'll slap you with lead!" Harmon flared. "Go for your gun, damn' you."

As he spoke, his hand flashed to the Colt at his side. Buck's hand moved, too, like the flick of a lizard's tongue, but not towards his gun. It caught Harmon's up-flashing wrist and stopped it dead. His other hand twisted the naked Colt from Harmon's grip. Then his right flashed again, and the report of his open palm against the younger man's cheek seemed almost as loud as the report of the gun would have been.

Harmon staggered and then stood staring, the mark of Buck's hand white at first on a scarlet cheek, then scarlet on a face gone white with humiliation and fury. For Harmon was staring not at Buck but at a figure outlined against the light from the open doorway—the figure of Linda Stuart.

HER presence changed what might have conceivably been no more than a fight between two men who had lost their tempers into a humiliation which Harmon could never forget nor forgive. He stood silent, motionless, while the others watched him curiously, waiting for his next move.

Buck, who had not seen Linda and who had no idea of the insane hell of shame and hatred which raged in the man before him, said grimly, "Maybe that'll teach you manners. When you come to your senses, you can come an' get your gun. Until then, I'm keepin' it. Like that, you maybe won't get your fool self killed."

He turned on the other two, his eyes blazing. "I'm givin' you until daylight to get out of Thunder Valley," he snapped. "We don't want your breed in here. Get out an' stay out, or we'll save the law some trouble."

Pinto Allen got to his feet suddenly, his chair tipping over behind him. His eyes, with the lamp-light washing out what little color there was in the irises looked like the eyes of a blind man. "By God," he swore. "You're—"

"Set down!" Cree Bucknell snapped. "Who the hell ordered you to go on the

warpath?" He turned a sardonic gaze on Buck. "You ain't right hospitable, hombre," he said, his expression bleak. "We won't be forgettin' it."

"I don't care what you remember, so long as you remember to leave," Buck told him grimly. Contemptuously, he turned and walked out, making no attempt to guard himself from a shot in the back.

Jack Harmon, still frozen, unmoving, watched him go, saw him shake his head at Linda Stuart, as though in rebuke for her presence, saw them disappear together into the darkness. After a moment, he sat down again at the table.

Cree Bucknell eyed him shrewdly. "A hombre like that is shore lookin' for boot-hill fixin's," he observed. "In your place I wouldn't be long givin' him what he wants."

"His hand works a mite faster'n Jack's here," Pinto pointed out. "You'd ought to have let me ventilate him while I had the chance."

"I stopped you because he's Jack's meat," Cree said, shooting him a meaning glance. "There's plenty of ways of takin' care of a jasper that's faster than you are."

Jack Harmon was silent, staring at the table in front of him.

"How about it, Jack?" Cree went on. "You ain't lettin' him get away with it, are you."

Jack Harmon looked at him, his eyes narrowed, vicious. "No," he breathed. "No—I'm not!"

For a long moment the two stared at one another—a long glance, secret, intimate, understanding. Then Harmon said, "Lend me one of your guns, will you?"

Cree Bucknell reached for his left holster and put a six-gun on the table without a word. For the space of two heart beats it lay there, black, ugly, menacing under the lamplight. Then Harmon's hand reached out and closed over it. . . .

BUCK McGEE took Linda home in his buckboard. When he left her he had not forgotten entirely about Jack Harmon, but almost. He let the two finely-matched blacks take their own gait home while he lay back against the seat and thought about Linda.

She had said they could be married a week from tonight. Her mother, herself, had suggested it. And it had been only because of her mother, who was not well, that Linda had postponed the day, feeling that she was needed at home.

A sort of ineffable happiness penetrated Buck in the same way that the clear silver light of the moon suffused the air about him. He rode in a daze of dreams —seeing Linda as mistress of the Circle M, feeling the thrilling softness of her lips on his, as he left her that night, remembering the fragrance of her skin and hair, visioning the joys of the years before him.

When the ponies drew up at the south pasture gate, he sat a long moment before he realized that they had stopped. Weaving in among his dreams of Linda had come the thought of Jack Harmon. And in this new access of happiness he began to regret what he had done. He knew that Jack had cared for Linda. It must have been tough for the kid to be slapped before her. Lord knew he had deserved it, and still . . . Well, Buck would make it up with him. Jack would forget his boy's love for Linda and he and Buck would be friends again. It wouldn't be long now before Jack had a spread of his own. Buck had been helping him toward it. Now he would do more.

Those were the dreams his ponies' stop awoke him from. He came out of his absorption with a laugh, wondering how

long he had been sitting there, and got down to open the gate.

He reached out and slid back the bar. Something hit him a heavy blow in the back. His knees sagged, while bewilderment stormed through his mind and the blasting roar of a Colt .45 sounded in his ears. His knees caved and suddenly his face was in the dust at the foot of the gate post.

He thought, unbelievingly, "I've been shot." He tried to move but his legs would not obey him. They felt numb, with a numbness which crept up—up. He tried to shift his position to get at his holstered gun, but could not manage that either. What in hell was the matter with him, anyway? Then an inferno of pain began somewhere in his middle body, and vaguely be became aware of something wet and warm running over his flesh, soaking into his shirt.

He thought, "I'm hit bad," and was conscious of fear. Was he dying? Would he die out here in the moonlight night, before anybody thought to look for him? Desperately, he tried again to move, but his legs refused movement, and his arms felt horribly weak. Only his head managed to move, infinitesimally, but enough to let him twist agonized eyes over his shoulder.

And then he saw it. For a full second, the significance of it did not get through to his brain, dazed by the shock of the bullet and now smashed again into near-unconsciousness by this incredible sight. The figure of a man was standing in a clump of brush behind him, raised up now, the upper part of his body clear in the bright light of the moon. He was standing with a heavy Colt in his hand, leaning forward, the gun poised as though to take another shot. Buck lay still, not so much out of caution as because his paralyzed body and mind alike refused movement. The strength was ebbing from him rapidly and a miasma of darkness swept up to engulf his brain. Through that growing fog he saw dimly that the man had decided that it was unnecessary to shoot again. He holstered the six-gun and faded back into the brush.

That man was Jack Harmon! Buck had known it beyond any shadow of a doubt at the first glance. But until the figure withdrew, his mind had rejected the idea. Now, as every nerve along the bullet-tunnel through his body screamed in agony and the death-darkness crept toward his brain, he tasted the bitter truth to full. Not Cree Bucknell, not Pinto Allen, but Jack Harmon, his friend, had shot him—in the back!

When consciousness next came back to him, his mind was curiously clear, but drained of all emotion. It seemed to hover, high and light, above a body which was dead except for that flaming tunnel of pain through its middle. He thought that the shadow cast by the gate post had moved a little but he was not sure.

THERE was a strange faint beat in his head, now—a beat which grew and grew until he recognized it as the beat of horses' hooves. Two horses there were, driven as a team. His range-bred ear assured him of that. And there was something familiar about the sound of their traveling. For the first time it occurred to him to remember his buckboard and the black harness-broncs. He had a confused impression that the pair had wheeled and stampeded at the shot. Yet those horses coming sounded like them.

Then the beat of the hoofs became a steady thunder, close—close! Pulled up. Small boots hit the ground beside him lightly, to the accompaniment of a smothered, horrified "Oh!" as though someone—a woman—had been struck. After that there was soft hands on his face and Linda's urgent, agonized voice

in his ear, the scent of Linda's hair in his nostrils.

"Darling—darling!" she was saying, "Are you hurt badly? I came as soon as I could. I came as soon as I could, darling. I—the broncs came back to me because I kept them for you that summer when you were away, I suppose. I came as soon as I could. *Buck,* darling, speak to me—*speak* to me!"

Then there was the ranch-house—his room at the Circle M, with Howler Kirnan there, and the rest of the boys, and Linda's hand soft on his forehead.

Somebody shouldered through the crowd and caught his hand, crying, "Buck!" in a choked voice. It was Harmon. . . .

Buck looked at him, immediate comprehension drowning the first flicker of surprise. Harmon thought that from behind he had been unrecognized. He was putting on an act, now, to show his innocence. Buck looked into his eyes for what seemed a long time. He had no intention of telling anybody that Harmon had shot him. That was a matter strictly between them, to be settled if he got well. He merely wanted the other man to know that he knew. It was a long slow look—as clear and eloquent as an open accusation.

Harmon stiffened, his face going suddenly pale. Buck McGee *knew!*

It was impossible for him to know, yet . . . Or was it? Perhaps that little movement which he had taken to be merely a trick of the shadows around the gate, and had nearly caused him to shoot again, *had* been a movement, after all! His mind raced, and panic swept over him. He fought, it desperately. He could brazen it out, act it out. He had only to keep his head. But the idea died in birth. It was not suspicion which looked out of Buck's eyes—it was certainty.

Unconsciously, his hand released the inert hand on the bed, but his eyes could not tear themselves away from those of Buck. Hard, contemptuous, filled with a scorn so deep that it needed some other name than scorn, those eyes looked their message of understanding and acceptance. They held him, terrible in the nearness of death, terrible in their understanding and in the threat which they seemed scarcely to bother to convey. He read his sentence there. Read it, and panic gripped him. In a minute, this dying man would speak.

There were half a dozen men in that room—hard men who had no love for Jack Harmon. One word from Buck and they would be on him—nothing could stop them. Behind them, the men of that valley lifted like thronging ghosts—each man with a rope in his hand.

Dry-lipped, Jack Harmon wrenched his eyes away from those terrible, silent, accusing eyes, turned to meet Howler Kirnan's hard, questioning gaze. Had he, too, understood?

The killer's hand flashed to his gun, came up like lashing blued flame.

"Hands up!" he snarled. "Hands up—damn you! I'll gut-shoot the first fool that goes for a gun!"

ASTONISHMENT met his words, the dazed astonishment of men confronted with the outburst of a maniac. No man in that room had suspected him, unless it were Howler Kirnan. Slowly, protestingly, but inevitably in the face of that killer glare, the hands in the room went up.

"I know you think I did this. That fool"— a nod of his head toward Buck —"thinks so too. I'm goin' out that door, an' the first man that comes after me, I'll blast to hell." He was backing, crouched, toward the door.

The shocked, comprehending eyes of

Linda plunged into his, horror-struck, accusing.

"Yes!" he yelled savagely. "I shot him. I broke his damn back an' he's goin' to die, if you want to know it. An' I'll have you, too. I'm comin' back for you. I'll tear your goody-goody little soul apart an' put it together again. This valley ain't through with me. . . ." He was at at the door now.

Howler Kirnan's old, faded blue eyes blazed. Harmon was looking at Linda. It was his chance. His gnarled right hand had lowered imperceptibly. Now it drove for his holstered gun.

Jack Harmon's six-gun swung a fraction of an inch—bellowed twice, filling the crowded room with rattling thunder. A hoarse grunt tore through Howler's tight lips as the soft-nosed lead smacked into him. His knees buckled and he fell forward on his face, dead before he hit the floor.

"That's for you—you fangless old rattler," Harmon snarled. "Anybody else want any? Come an' get it, if you do. I know you all hate me. By God, I'd like to send you all to hell!"

He jumped backward into the obscurity of the hall, and they could hear his steady steps backing toward the outer door, waiting to drive lead into any one who ventured out of the room. Then the steps ceased a moment and took up again, running toward the corral.

The crowd in that room moved, jumping toward the door, sixguns out. They came out into the darkness blasting orange fire at hoofbeats that raced away from the corral.

Somebody yelled. "He's away—damn him!"

They jumped for horses and saddled, but every man among them knew the chase was hopeless. Harmon's was the only mount saddled. With the start he had, at night, there would be no chance of catching him.

Inside the room, Buck McGee lay motionless, the sweat of agony on his brow, his eyes blue bells of helpless fury. On the floor beside him, Howler Kirnan—Howler, who had served his father and himself with equal faithfulness, who had warned him against this murdering snake—Howler lay dead, his blood making a deep crimson pool on the boards. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

A Lone Fight

BUCK McGEE did not die. He fought through long days and nights of delirium, of weakness, skirting the borderline between life and death. He fought through until he was out of danger—and then wished he was not!

It was not until several weeks had passed that an inkling of the truth came to him. He looked at old Mrs. Gunther, who had left her ranch to help Linda Stuart nurse him. She sat knitting placidly in the chair beside his bed, as though she intended to be there all the rest of her life—and clamped his teeth shut on the question which had lay like lead in his mind. He looked at Linda, her eyes warm with love and—something else—and forced the question back into his choking throat. That "something else," which might have been pity, lanced through him like a flame from hell.

He would wait, he told himself, until the doctor came again. He had been brought, hell-for-leather, from Buckbrush Center, the nearest town below, in time to pull Buck through. Now, he was making the long ride twice a week to see that everything went well. Doctor Dan Morris—as good a sawbones as there was in the West. He would know, and Buck would make him tell.

When Doctor Dan came, ruddy, jovial, hale, Buck met him with a face which seemed more drawn than usual and demanded to be left alone with him.

"I want the bad news, Doc," he told him quietly. "What is it?"

"Now what? Now what?" the médico boomed in jovial evasion. "What you been thinkin' up to devil yourself with now?" But Buck read the concern, the trouble, in his eyes.

"Why can't I move my legs?" he demanded directly.

"Hell! You're gettin' ambitious, ain't you?" the doctor exploded. "You just pulled one foot out of the grave an' now you want to go on kickin'. You forget, I reckon, that you got a chunk of lead in your back that would have killed most men."

Buck looked at him. "You ain't foolin' me?" he said in a low voice. "I can stand the truth better than a lot of womanish palaver. Are them legs goin' to get well?"

The doc looked a little shame-faced, then he looked grave, reading the tragic determination in Buck's eyes, knowing that he could no longer conceal the truth.

"I don't know, Buck," he said soberly. "I—I'm sorry, boy—but I just don't know. That bullet ripped pretty near the spine. Someway, it's injured the motor nerves that control the lower limbs. You're paralyzed from the waist down. How long it'll last and whether it'll ever get well is somethin' nobody can tell you. An injured nerve takes longer to get back than any other tissue. If it's hurt bad enough, it mostly doesn't get back at all. There isn't any way for me to tell how bad the hurt is in your case. An' there ain't much I can do for it. Later on, we can try massagin' it, an' hot an' cold applications. But mostly, it's a matter of luck."

Buck was silent a moment, feeling the sweat come out on his forehead as this blow got home to him. "What're the chances ag'in me?" he managed finally, between set teeth.

The doctor hesitated imperceptibly, and then answered, "Nobody can tell you that, son." But Buck read his answer in the pity deep in his eyes. The doctor didn't think he had any chance worth talking about.

He shut his eyes for a long while, while the médico talked on, trying to soften the blow, encouraging him to believe that even if his legs did not come back he could make a life worth living for himself. Buck did not listen, and when he opened his eyes again there was a hell of bitterness in them which shocked Dr. Dan Morris, who had seen more things than most men.

Buck remained silent the rest of that day. He suffered the presence of Mrs. Gunther with closed eyes and tight lips. She, for her part, sat silent, her old eyes wise and kind, endlessly busy at her knitting. Buck thought irritably that it was foolish, that knitting. Since her husband's death, Mary Gunther had ridden range—almost as good as a man in her day. Even now she got her stiff old frame into a saddle to make some effort at keeping an eye on her little spread. Riding range and knitting did not go together. It came to Buck, like a loud echo of mocking laughter, that it would be more fitting now if he were doing the knitting.

He said, harshly, "I won't be needin' any nursin' after today, Mrs. Gunther. You'd better be gettin' back an' seein' how your spread's goin'."

Mary Gunther appeared unaware of the rudeness and the ungratitude of his remark. "No hurry," she said placidly. "I got plenty of time."

BUCK was silent a moment. Then he said between his teeth, "I don't need a nurse, so there's no use of you stayin'."

Mrs. Gunther's eyes were soft, though her tone was light. "Doc told me," she said. "You're takin' it hard, boy—nat'rally. But it ain't as bad as all that. I know of a case of a man who was hurt like you, an' he got well. You got the patience for it an' the will-power. You'll get well, too."

Buck said, sneering. "I don't need any soft-soap. I can take what's comin' to me."

So she knew, did she? Obviously, she must have known before he did, but the naturalness of that did not lessen her sin in his eyes. The fact that anybody knew of this shameful misfortune of his offended him beyond bearing. Everybody would know it, he thought bitterly, but even that did not lessen his resentment. *She* knew it and was sitting there pitying him.

He scarcely listened to her reply, assuring him serenely that it was not soft soap but the simple truth.

He said, rudely, hating her, "If it's all the same to you, I'd take it kind—if you didn't stay. Wong can take care of me as well as you. He does most of it, anyway. You don't owe me nothin', an' I like to pay as I go."

The old lady's eyes filled with sudden tears. She took a moment to control herself, then she said, gently. "Don't I owe you anythin', Buck? Ain't you forgettin' some calves that a boy's been throwin' over into an old woman's range—because his heart was big with the need of helpin' an old friend? Maybe you think I don't owe you anythin', son—but I do, an' I'm not like to forget it.

"It ain't only that, though," she went on. "There's been other things—you takin' me to all the high-jinks in the valley, when in your high-steppin' young heart you was a-rarin' to go over an' take Linda—like anybody else would have done, anyhow. You been like a son to me, boy—like the son I never had. You can't stop me from takin' care of you, now that you need it."

"I don't need it, an' I don't want it," Buck flared, fighting the effect her words had had on him.

Mrs. Gunther was silent. She had resumed her knitting. She had the appearance of a woman who had been in that place ever since anybody could remember and would be there forever.

"So you knew about those calves an' made a fool of me about it," Buck said bitterly.

"I knew you didn't want to be worried with thanks, Buck," the old lady told him placidly. "I know your kind. But I didn't mean to fool you, son. It's all in my will, leavin' my little spread to you, with the gratefulness of a lonely old woman. It wasn't so much to you, maybe. But old people set a lot of store by things like that. When — when Pa went — there wasn't much left for me. I—you—"

She got up with the tears streaming down her face. "I reckon I'll go out awhile, son," she said. "Before I make more of an old fool of myself, an' worry you more than you are now. But don't make me try to go away, Buck. Because no matter how much you say it, I ain't goin'. I'm stayin' right here—until you're well!"

"An' that'll be a long time," Buck muttered bitterly. But he had to accept the defeat, knowing that there was no way to change the old lady's mind. He contented himself as far as possible by refusing to admit that her presence held any comfort for him.

HE WAS alone until Linda came. Her step in the hall brought an agony into him that was half-pain, half-joy. But when she opened the door, his eyes were hard, his mouth grim and forbidding.

"Never mind kissin' me," he growled

as she came eagerly towards him. She stopped, catching her breath.

"Why—what's the matter, Buck?" she asked. He saw that she had not met and talked with Mrs. Gunther on the way in.

"There's no use keepin' on with somethin' that can't lead anywhere," he told her harshly. "You know I'm paralyzed, an' can't marry."

"Why not, Buck?" she asked quietly. "We—love each other. You don't think it makes any difference to me that—that—"

"—That I'm not a man any more," he finished, jeering. "Of course not! Not just a little thing like that."

"Don't be silly, Buck!" she told him sharply. "There's nothing like that. I love you just as I always did. I just want to—to take care of you all the more."

His face worked, then hardened. "I don't want your pity," he said harshly. "I don't want anybody's pity. I can get along by myself."

"It's not pity, Buck. It's love."

"Then you better go off somewhere an' get over it."

"You promised to marry me, Buck. I'm holding you to it."

She saw his hands clench until the knuckles were white, and for a moment his eyes looked like those of a man in mortal agony. "Don't!" he ground out, between set teeth. "Don't talk like that!"

The compassion in her heart seemed more than she could bear. She went toward him with hands outstretched. "Buck!" She cried his name in a voice broken by love, by tenderness, and by—pity.

It was the pity he saw, without knowing that it was pity not so much for his physical state as for the thing it was doing to his mind, his pride of manhood.

"Keep away from me," he snarled.

She stopped as though he had struck her.

"I've got trouble enough without havin' some girl foolin' around me," he said savagely.

Her face was suddenly pale, but she said in a steady voice. "You don't mean this, Buck. I know how you must feel, having heard about—about your legs—for the first time. I'm going to go away now, dear, but I'm coming back. I know it isn't you talking, today, Buck."

He let her get almost to the door, then his voice called her back. "You needn't bother to come again," he said. "I know it was you that got me into this."

She whirled, the color coming up into her face, her eyes blazing unbelief and carrying danger signals at the same time. *"What?"* she demanded incredulously. "What did you say?"

He had the grace to hesitate a moment, his mouth and eyes nervous under the blue lightnings that flickered out at him. Then his jaw tightened.

"I mean I know you led Jack on, because you're a flirt. If you hadn't done that he wouldn't have had enough reason to want to kill me." His voice was deliberate, cruel.

He sat stiff and silent under the storm of indignation and reproach which broke over him. Then, for long moments, after she had flung herself out the door he sat with eyes half closed, his chin sunk on his chest and a groan burst from between his clenched teeth.

He had done the thing he had to do, had done it brutally and well—had driven her to the freedom she was to find to claim for herself. And now he was alone. The friend who had shot him in the back, the girl who had offered all her loyalty and love, were both gone—as dead to him as the father who had been the only other being to whom he had been close. And he himself was virtually dead—no

more than half a man, doomed to spend the remainder of his days sitting in a wheel chair, helpless, an object of pity.

Pity? Most of the valley people were probably laughing at him up their sleeves! They had warned him against Jack Harmon, but he had known better than they. He had even offended some of them, defending the bushwhacker whom he had claimed on counted on as a friend.

The bitterness in him burned into hot hatred—hatred of the people who might be pitying him or laughing at him; hatred of all men who could walk free on two legs and laugh in the sunshine, but above all hatred for the man who had betrayed him. At thought of him, the nails of his clenched fingers dug blood-deep into his palms; the cords of his neck stood out, and a vein swelled and throbbed on his forehead.

THE aroused hell of that temper which he had spent his life in fighting shook him now like a storm, threatening to rupture the very walls of the helpless body which contained it. If only Jack Harmon could somehow be brought within reach of his hands. Harmon thought he was strong! There wasn't enough strength in ten like him to break the death grip which Buck would clamp around his throat.

The salt taste of blood from his bitten lips was in his mouth—blood streamed from his nostrils as though his nose had been struck. The wonder was that no blood vessel burst in his brain, under the pressure of that rage and red hatred.

But Jack Harmon would never come back. The man would know too well what awaited him. Harmon—the snake who struck without warning—was gone for good.

A haze of blackness entered Buck's brain and for a moment he lost consciousness, exhausted by weakness and the force of his emotions.

From that day, he was a changed man. He lay silent all day long, responding to no attempts to talk with him, refusing to see the valley people who called to see him and cheer him up.

One or two of these latter, bluffly forced their way anyhow, convinced that he should not be allowed to mope alone, whether he wanted to or not. These got such a taste of Buck's tongue as could only have been answered by a blow in the face or gun-fire if the words had come from anyone but a helpless cripple.

Linda did not come back.

A day came when the doctor insisted that he was well enough to sit up in a wheel chair. He submitted, listlessly, and from then on took up an existence which differed from the other only in the fact that he sat up, dressed by Wong Loo, the Chinese cook, instead of lying down. Old Mrs. Gunther finally gave up, so persistantly did he ignore her, and left, with tears streaming down her face.

Buck had appointed Mike Graver as foreman in Howler's place. With him he talked briefly and indifferently about the affairs of the ranch. Otherwise he spoke to no one. He had his chair placed by a window where he could look out over the corral and the south pasture. It was impossible to see, from there, the gate at which he had been shot, but he could look in that direction. His eyes, briefly diverted by some sight in the ranch yard, soon returned towards the scene of his ambush, like a ghost drawn always back to the spot in which it has died.

That dim, set face at the window, with the lines of bitterness etched around the mouth and the brooding hopelessness in the eyes, came to be a familiar sight to the hands as they rode in from work, but it was one to which they never could get used.

"It's like workin' for a corp," muttered Slim Varney, who had been taken on as bronc-peeler in place of Jack Harmon. And the other hands, for all their old loyalty to Buck, were inclined to agree with him.

Varney felt like changing his opinion, however, when he brought in the palomino stallion for breaking, not knowing that Buck himself had already nearly completed the training of the horse, months before.

That palomino was the cream of all Buck's horse stock. He had quietly and secretly begun the breaking of him, intending to give him to Jack Harmon. Buck knew that Jack had a genuine love for fine horse-flesh and guessing that would please his friend more than anything else he could do for him, he had chosen the palomino because that horse was the fastest and toughest he owned. Buck had gone happily about the breaking and gentling, full of secret pleasure at the though of Jack's face when the stallion was handed over to him.

Now, at the sight of him in the corral, rage and hatred flared up in Buck again. The very sight of the horse was hateful to him, because of what he had once meant. He leaned forward, tearing with his powerful arms at the window, sending it up with a force that jarred out one of the panes and flung it, shattering, to the ground.

"What in hell do you mean, you damn' lazy lunk head," he roared, his face contorted, "by bringin' that stallion in here?"

SLIM VARNEY stared in utter astonishment, his face flushing. Yet, automatically, he began walking toward the window. When he spoke, some obscure power of personal authority in the voice of the man who sat there held Varney's tone respectful, despite the anger which had begun to come up in him.

"I found him out on the west range," he said. "So I hazed him in with the others. He's the best piece of horse-flesh on the spread, unless I'm missin' my guess."

"I don't have to be told what horse is good an' what ain't!" Buck snarled. "Who the hell gave you authority to bring that stallion in?"

Varney's mouth hung open. "Why—why, hell, I didn't know I had to have authority," he replied, stammering.

"Well, you know it now," Buck snapped, the veins knotted on his forehead. "Turn that horse loose an' don't fool with him again."

Varney shrugged. "Sure," he said, "if that's the way you want it."

He turned and walked back toward the corral, wondering whether he wouldn't throw up his job. He had gotten almost back there when Buck's voice recalled him. The expression and manner of the man at the window had changed entirely. He was quiet now, his eyes withdrawn, queer.

"Now that you've got him there," he said, "you can leave him. But be careful with him. He's nearly broken. You do anything to ruin him an' I'll have your hide."

Varney stared, mumbling assent. "Shucks," he muttered to himself, going back to the corral, "that jasper's loco as as hell."

Buck himself was not sure why he had changed his mind. He only knew that his rage had died down suddenly, that he preferred somehow to have the palomino there than elsewhere. But as the days passed, the sight of the horse did more to lighten the mood of black despair which held him than did any other thing. Insensibly, he quit looking southward toward the pasture gate, began instead to let his eyes dwell on the magnificance of the animal in the corral. His eye would

run lovingly over the flat bones and low hocks which advertised the lightning speed which lay in them, over the proud arch of the neck and the sensitive, flaring nostrils, the deep, broad chest and the powerful muscles which rippled under the satiny, golden coat.

In some way, without his knowing it, the creamy-maned stallion became an obscure symbol of hope to him. He even weaved day-dreams about him, seeing himself on that superb back, picturing himself running down his enemy with the help of those slender, stamping, powerful legs. Jack Harmon, he thought exultantly, should have waited a little. He had stolen the wrong horse.

Moods—fantasies of a man crippled and helpless, forced him to fulfill the fierce desires of his nature in the realm of make-believe. Yet even this alleviation of his despair did not show in his outward attitude. So Jud Bentley found, when, disregarding the rebuffs Buck had delt out right and left, he came to offer his help for the fall round-up.

"What makes you think I need any help?" Buck asked, cold-eyed.

Jud reddened, and shifted his raw-boned bulk awkwardly from foot to foot. "I just thought that seein' Howler wasn't here no more—Mike Graver ain't had much experience—an' you bein' kind of laid up. . . ."

"Come to help the poor cripple, huh?" Buck sneered. "The Circle M don't need charity. I can get along all right as I am—and plenty!"

Jud's temper began to get up, despite the resolutions he had made when he had determined to see Buck and offer his help.

"You're makin' a fool of yourself, Buck," he snapped. "Ain't no charity about neighbors helpin' one another. You're drivin' all your real friends away from you with this fool attitude of yours."

"My real friends, huh?" Buck caught him up. "You was one of the ones that warned me against Jack Harmon, wasn't you? I reckon you feel pretty salty about that, don't you? Well, say, I can still run my own life an' pick out my own friends, without any help from you."

"Have it your own way," Jud ground out, incensed. "You always was a stiff-necked booger—thought to damn' much of yourself for your own good!"

He turned toward the door. Buck's voice followed him, mockingly.

"I reckon you're running' the valley now, so you think you can run me. Kind of glad to have me down an' out, aren't you? Well, to hell with you. The boss of the Circle M may sit in a wheel chair, but the Circle M stands on its own feet."

Something like that happened to old Pay-Gulch Adams who wandered in to make Buck a present of two turkeys he had shot. Buck told him shortly that he didn't like turkey and that if he did, he could have them shot for himself.

Pay-Gulch backed out, ruffled and indignant, and the Valley, which had tried to be lenient about Buck's savage manner, gave him up for lost. He was left strictly alone.

It was late Autumn when Linda finally gave in and came back.

Her step in the hall sent the man in the chair suddenly erect, his heart pounding, his hands white-knuckled on the chair arms. Then the door opened and, miraculously, she was there. Standing there in the doorway, as he had dreamed it a thousand times—her hair a glowing, red-gold coronet in the dim light; her mouth shadowy, had kept its clean-cut sweetness; her body curved and graceful, poised midway between clear, range-hardened strength and sheer alluring femininity.

Despite himself, his breath caught at

the sight of her, drawing in between in his teeth in a sharp hiss. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

War Clouds Gather

SHE was paler than he remembered her, and there were shadows under her eyes, deepened their blue profundity. The stamp of suffering on her soft, candid, courageous face sent a sharp pain through his heart, like a knife striking. He gathered all his strength to resist the thing she did to him.

"Howdy, Buck," she breathed softly. And it was as though there were an entreaty, a plea for mercy in the greeting.

He said, "Howdy," grimly, coldly.

"Don't look at me like that, Buck," she said softly. "I've come back—I've come back, even after what you said to me."

He laughed harshly. "Yeah? What am I supposed to do? Cheer? You had it right when you were stayin' away."

He saw her wince, steel herself. "I didn't come just for myself, Buck," she told him.

"If you came for me," he snapped, "you could have saved yourself the trouble."

He saw her face go paler than it had been, as though his words had struck at her mortally, and for a second the alert vitality of her body sagged. It was an instant only. Then the color suddenly stained her cheeks and her slender body drew taut again.

"I came for you," she said steadily, "but not the way you mean. You're makin' a fool of yourself, Buck. You've driven off every friend you had in the world. But that isn't the worst of it. You're a quitter. You're yellow—yellower than any man I ever knew. I'm ashamed of you, Buck—and there isn't any friend of yours in the valley who isn't ashamed of you."

For a second Buck stared at her incredulously. Yellow? Could anybody apply that word to him? It was as though somebody had kicked him suddenly in the stomach. Then anger came to his rescue. He made no attempt to defend himself or to demand the reason for such an accusation. He merely said, coldly, "I don't know just what I'm yellow about—but I don't see what it's got to do with you, anyway."

Her face stained a deeper red. "I've tried not to love you, Buck," she said, chin up, splendidly courageous, "but I couldn't help it. That's what it's got to do with me. You've let this thing lick you. Instead of facing it cheerfully as a man, you've just sat here and sulked, forgetting everybody but yourself an' your own little pride and misfortune. I'm ashamed of you because you're a part of me—and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

She could see the barb go home in him, see his features quiver with agony. Her eyes softened. "Buck—Oh, Buck," she cried. "Let me. . . ."

His head snapped up. "Talk!" he said bitterly. "*Your* back isn't busted. *You* aren't paralyzed from the waist down. What the hell have I got to be yellow about—or not be yellow about? What have I got to quit about or not quit about? I've been 'quit' all right—an' plenty! It's been done for me—I don't have to do it."

"Yes, you have," she told him, hardening again. "You've just laid down. You put your friends aside out of what you think is pride. But it was really just cowardice. You were afraid they'd pity you, and you couldn't stand it. You didn't care about what happened to anybody but you, or what anybody but you felt. As far as you were concerned, the valley could go to the devil. Well, it may please

you to know that it's goin' there—fast! But that doesn't make you any less a quitter, Buck. Old Mike would be ashamed of you, just as I am."

"What do you mean, the valley's goin' to the devil?" he asked sharply.

Her mouth tightened. "Jud Bentley and Ora Cowan have tangled. Some silly dispute over water rights on the upper creek—as though there wasn't enough water for all of us! It's just an excuse. Ever since you got laid up they've been ruffling up at each other like a couple of fighting cocks over who was to be King of the valley. People are taking sides. Bad blood is getting up everywhere. If it keeps on, dad says that Thunder Valley's going to be ripped wide open."

She was silent a moment, while the man in the chair stared at her. "He says that," she went on, almost as though she were talking to herself, "but he's taking sides himself. Josh Cowan stepped on *his* toes, someway."

She raised her head, fixing him with her gaze. "This is *your* fault," she said cuttingly. "You could have stopped it if you had been man enough to try—if you hadn't been just a quitter."

"What a pity," he remarked bitterly, "that I didn't turn out better."

"You can still stop it," she cried out, "if you're not too yellow. Folks'll still turn back to you, if you call 'em. Stop thinkin' about yourself, Buck—think a little about somebody else."

He sneered. "Go an' talk to a man, not a half of a man. What do I care what happens to these fools. If they can't take care of themselves, let 'em go to hell. I've got trouble enough mindin' my own business."

Her lovely soft mouth drew tight and hard, her eyes blazed in sudden warning. "I've loved you, Buck," she said, "but I can't go on loving a man like you're showing yourself to be. I could marry a man who didn't have the use of his legs, but I couldn't marry a man who was a quitter. Unless you change. . . ."

"I'm not askin' you to marry me," Buck rapped out, his face writhing furiously. "Who told you to come in here an' talk about who you'd marry or wouldn't marry? I'm runnin' my own life. All I ask is to be let alone—an' I'd take it kindly if you'd do your part toward lettin' me alone, along with the rest of 'em!"

"Then I will," Linda told him scornfully, and walked out.

FOR hours after her departure he sat with a face of stone, no flicker of expression betraying the turmoil her words had aroused in him. The valley on the verge of dissension! That stirred him as even her charge of cowardice had not. Ingrained in him, a part of every living breath he drew, had been Mike McGee's obsession for peace, which amounted almost to a religion— Peace among the men of Thunder Valley!

Yet what could he do, he asked himself bitterly. No one would pay any attention to a cripple like him, even if he were fool enough to interfere. The certainty of that set a new acid eating into his soul worse, even, than that which had gnawed at him on his own account.

He failed to respond to Wong's greeting as he came to undress him for the night. He was like a man in a dream—a nightmare. A feud in Thunder Valley! The fools! Once that started, there was no telling where it would end. He saw a vision of the valley devastated by war, soaked in blood and ruin.

It was dawn before his eyes, wide open and staring at the darkness, closed in the brief, restless sleep of exhaustion. When he opened them a few hours later, it was to find his vision still vivid before him. He tried to tell himself that he exaggerated, but he knew he did not. Jud Bentley

was a hot-headed fool. Ora Cowan wasn't much better. The thing would work out, in the end, into killing—and one killing led to another as certainly as night led to day.

He yelled, "Wong!" in a voice like a harsh croak. The Chinaman came smiling and bobbing. "Get me dressed!" and then, "Get out!"

He waited until the cook had closed the door behind him and padded off toward the kitchen. Then, gripping the arms of his chair, he flung himself out onto the floor, catching himself on his hands as he toppled face downward. He lay for a moment, back sagging and weak, legs helpless, supported on his elbows. Then, with set jaw, he began to drag himself along the floor, moving like a cat with a broken back. His legs would not work.

Jerking his body, he managed to double them up under him, but they crumpled under him like the legs of a rag doll. Yet painfully he crawled and tried, the sweat standing out on his face, the cords in his neck swollen, not from the effort of dragging himself along but from the fierce struggle of his will, telegraphing its message to those legs.

After an endless time, he had to give it up.

In trying to get back into his chair he turned it over, but he dragged it and himself to the window and with one hand clutching the sill, righted it and got himself back. When Wong came to bring his lunch, he was sitting there as though he had never been out of it. Only his face, whiter, more bitter and despairing, hinted at what that effort and that failure had cost him.

Yet that afternoon he tried again—and that evening. Then he allowed himself to be put to bed, crushed again by the plain hopelessness of the effort.

As the Autumn days deepened into winter, so, somehow, the new fierce determination of this lonely, broken man deepened and set irrevocably. The hard woods on the hillside flamed scarlet and gold, died down to shriveled brown, and finally whirled off in the early winds of winter. Snow came in great, circling soft flakes, in fine, hard-driven white grit, in the howl and hurry and deadly white confusion of sudden, violent blizzards. Despite the utmost care, despite the massed stacks of alfalfa hay, cattle died, snow-bound and starving. Half-frozen men, wind-whipped, weather-harried, rode the ranges like sheeted ghosts damned to torture; grim-lipped, undaunted. Yet nowhere on the Thunder range was a battle fought comparable to that which raged each day in the obscure, darkened room where Buck McGee fought the paralysis which held him captive.

He fought it sitting in his chair, white-lipped, furious-eyed — *willing* it away. Fought it dragging himself across the floor, jerking and torturing his helpless dead limbs. He harried Wong, making him massage the unresponding muscles until the Chinaman's arms ached and the skin was nearly rubbed away from the senseless legs.

Every night brought failure and black despair. Yet every morning brought a renewal of determination, of mental torture, of effort—sobbing, racking, hopeless.

Hopeless? There came a day when the ice cracked in Thunder Creek and something snapped dimly in Buck McGee's spinal column—when for the first time a halting, quivering leg responded, dragging forward of its own accord until the knee brought up against the man's sweating ribs. When that happened, the master of the Circle M lay flat on the floor and sobbed and laughed and wept again like a crazy man.

Came a day later, when the wild-flowers carpeted the valley floor in ecsta-

tic patterns of white and gold and royal purple; when Wong opened the door to find his boss erect on both feet. He was hanging hard with strained, adhesive palms to the wall, moving, walking, on two reluctant legs.

And Wong, the impassive, suffered a collapse of his polite, yellow mask, which broke into a lot of unrelated pieces, most of which managed to be somehow wet with tears.

"Hoolay!" Wong yelled, beside himself. "Boss walkee! Hoolay! Hoolay!"

The words were a singularly inadequate expression of Wong's feelings but the tone made up for that. Buck turned a grinning face at him from the wall and barked, "Get out of here, you yeller devil —an' keep your mouth shut!"

The effort and the relaxation of attention from his legs were too much for him. He lost balance and toppled, clawing helplessly, to the floor. Wong squawked and ran to him.

Buck looked up from the floor, still grinning. "Get out of here, you Chink jawhead!" he yelled. "I can damn' well help myself!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer's Return

THERE the thing stopped. Buck could force his tottering legs into some semblance of movement, slow and infinitely painful, but there they balked. Day after day and week after week went by without any noticeable improvement.

Meanwhile, things in Thunder Valley —and elsewhere — were moving with greater rapidity. With Spring and the release of activity, the feud between Jud Bentley and Ora Cowan took on new life, fanned itself from smoldering embers into little licking flames that found fuel in the hundred small happenings which are of significance only where growing hatred and jealousy makes them so. And as before, it involved others, split the valley into two hostile factions, each containing inner factions almost as hostile.

And while dissension brewed it slow hell-broth within the valley, trouble, even deadlier, loomed from without. Jack Harman had forgotten nothing. He had heard, by accident, that Buck McGee was still alive, though badly hurt. That news had come early, before it was generally known that Buck was paralyzed. Since then he had heard nothing, for news from Thunder Valley was always scarce, and Harmon did not dare show too much interest in it.

Had he known of Buck's paralysis, the bitterness and hatred in his distorted mind might have burned a little less searingly. But he believed that the man he had tried to kill was living and perhaps already married to the girl he, Harmon, had hopelessly wanted, and before whom he had been humiliated and then self-branded as a murderer. That belief kept his hatred of the Valley and its people constantly alive.

When he had pulled out that night, he had managed to strike Cree Bucknell's trail. He had returned the renegade's gun earlier and had gotten an idea of the probable trail the two intended to take. With them, he had pulled several robberies, in the last of which Bucknell was killed. Pinto Allen had pulled out for Mexico, finding that things had gotten too hot for him. And Harmon was left on his own.

Gradually, as the winter wore on, a plan for getting his revenge on the valley and getting Linda Stuart for himself began to take shape in his mind. Through his renegate partners he had made some contacts along the Owlhoot Trail and believed he could enlist the aid of Big Nose Cummings, leader of a gang of ruthless marauders, dregs of the outlaw world.

Big Nose, however, was holed up in the mountains and it was not until Spring that Harmon was able to get to him. When he did, his reception was not at first very encouraging. The outlaw, thick-bellied, with small vicious eyes in a brutal, jowled face, glared at him suspiciously.

"You think because you ran with the coyote, Cree Bucknell, you got a right to come bargin' in on me, huh?" he demanded. "That don't rate you nothin'."

Harmon stirred uneasily. He knew he had taken a chance in coming up here uninvited. It was a secret hide-out which he had learned of from Allen. If he were not accepted, he would not be likely to leave it alive.

"I got a job that'll make you and me and your whole gang fat for a long time," he said. "That's why I come."

Big Nose narrowed his eyes. "It better be interestin'," he said grimly. "Talk fast," He slapped his gun-holster. "You're racin' against lead-poisonin'."

Harmon talked—fast. He told about Thunder Valley. "It's pickin's like you never run on before," he said, with rapid, nervous enthusiasm. "It's belly-deep in buffalo grass, swarmin' with fat cows like a coyote swarms with fleas, an' owned by a set of moss-horns that's been free from trouble for so long that they wouldn't know it if they met it in the middle of the road. They got money to burn—an' no bank. They got everything—horses, cattle—everythin'. An' shut off in the mountains a hundred miles from nowhere—no law, no town, no protection. We'll find enough cash in their private safes to fix us for a long time, an' what we don't find in cash we'll collect in beef-critters. Why, we can—"

The outlaw's beady eyes had narrowed with interest. Now he interrupted. "How big is it?" he demanded sharply. "How man men'll it take?"

"Thirty-forty," Harmon told him, "to make it safe. That's why—"

"If there's that many hombres up there, what's to prevent one from gittin' loose an' bringin' help. It takes time to drive cow-critters. . . ."

"Hell! That's what I'm tellin' you! It'd take two days to get help an' two more for the help to get there. We could have every cow in the valley lost or sold before anybody smelled our trail. But that ain't all. Every year they have a big Spring rodeo up there, a big general shindig that all the valley people show up for, an' no outsiders. It's due in a couple of week. All we have to do is to wait for the day and then ride down on 'em while they're together an' not suspectin' anything, an throw down on 'em."

He talked on, while Big Nose listened, his eyes glistening, shooting shrewd questions, testing out the details of the plan. At last he grunted. "I can git the men," he said, "though it'll take some time to round 'em up." Then for a second, the enthusiasm left his heavy face, was replaced by sudden deadliness. "There's just one thing, mister," he said, his eyes hard, menacing. "This better be on the level, or—"

"Why wouldn't it be on the level?" Harmon demanded. "What've I got to gain by tryin' to pull the wool over your eyes?"

The outlaw stared at him a moment, adding him up. "There's plenty of reward money to be had for the man who runs Big Nose Cummings and his gang into a trap," he said slowly. "Plenty of reward money—an' a reserved seat in hell!"

"I'm not fool enough to think I could get away with that," Harmon said impatiently. "I got as much to win or lose as you have."

"It better be so," the outlaw told him grimly.

IN THUNDER VALLEY, preparations for the annual dance and rodeo were proceeding with considerable disharmony, but proceeding nonetheless. The Cowan and Bentley factions clashed frequently and were especially bitter over the location of the arena. Cowan was in favor of getting Buck's permission to use the one they had always used, but Jud, still smarting from Buck's treatment of him, insisted that they ought to construct one near the old log fort, renovated relic of Indian warfare days, where the dances were always held.

It was Linda who at last settled that argument, by saying that it would be a kindness to Buck, rather than an affront, to hold the rodeo somewhere off his land. It could only be painful to him, in the state of mind he was in, to watch the games in which he had once excelled. So a new arena was constructed near the fort, as Jud Bentley had suggested.

Linda went to the dance the night before, although all her impulses were against it. Since her quarrel with Buck, she had become the object of lively rivalry between Ora and Jud, and she knew that the dance could only be unpleasant to her. It wasn't very agreeable to be fought over by two men, in neither of whom could she be interested as a husband, yet both of whom she liked as friends. This was what she told herself, but the truth was that the affair brought back to her too vividly the memory of the one before when she had danced so happily in Buck's arms.

The next day, instead of staying to watch the rodeo, she rode off alone, unable to take part in an event which Buck had once loved so much—he, who was champion of the valley.

But, though she rode to escape the painful memories which everything connected with last year's rodeo had for her, the memories rode with her, vivid and unshakable. So vivid that when she saw Jack Harmon in the flesh, she rubbed her eyes to be sure she was not imagining him.

Instinctively, she had taken to the high ground, where she could look over the valley, where she could see, as well as the crowd at the arena, Buck's ranch-house. The shelf on which she came out overlooked also the lower trail into the valley. Turning, she stared, open-mouthed, at the sight of nearly half a hundred men who rode up that trail at a steady trot. By luck, she was sheltered by brush which was nearly head-high to her horse and, against the dark background of the cliffs, invisible to the riders below.

Her first conclusion was that this must be a sheriff's posse, and she wondered what outlaws they could be hunting in such force. Then, gradually, she became aware of a sense of familiarity about one of the figures who rode in front—something unpleasant and menacing. A moment later she gasped unbelievingly. The riders had gotten close enough for her to recognize Jack Harmon!

The crowd drew up at the base of the spur of which her shelf formed the top, evidently in consultation, and at a gesture from the man who had ridden side by side with Harmon, one of the riders set off alone, still following the valley trail. The others lounged in their saddles, waiting.

Linda's mind raced. She remembered Jack Harmon's words the night he had killed Howler Kirnan: "I'm comin' back for you—this valley hasn't seen the last of me yet." If Harmon was at the head of this small army, they could be here for no good. And in fact, their sending off a man who was evidently a scout while the rest waited in concealment, was proof enough of evil intention. Linda turned her horse and rode off, carefully, keeping

to the high ground at a walk until she was sure she was out of hearing of the gang below. Then she set spurs to her horse and rode for the log fort at a break-neck gallop.

She had not been riding long, however, before she changed her course a little. Buck's ranch was this side of the fort, only a little out of her way. He had to be warned, gotten out. The Circle M would be the first place Jack Harmon hit for, she guessed. If Buck were found alone, it meant death—and no mistake this time!

Buck, alone at the ranch, was, like Linda, low that day. He, too, had been remembering the year before. And his legs hadn't gotten any better—his morning attempt to walk a little had seemed to him even more unsuccessful than usual. He was sitting in a sort of dull despair when steps sounded in the hallway and Linda burst in at the door.

"Buck," she said, breathlessly and without preamble. "You've got to get out of here. I'm going to wheel you out and hitch up your buckboard. You—you've got to get down to—to our place right away!"

BUCK stared, his eyes cold, questioning, and a little outraged. But Linda did not stop to examine his look. She hurried at once to his chair and took hold of it.

"You haven't by any chance gone loco?" he drawled.

"No," she said, still breathing hard, and beginning to move the chair. "There's no time to explain."

She didn't dare tell him what the danger was. He would want to wait there and have it out with Harmon.

His voice, ripping out, broke in on her hurried preoccupation. "Quit it!"

Despite herself that tone brought her up, frozen.

"What's the matter with you anyway? What's all this about?"

She bit her lip desperately. Was he going to be stubborn. She couldn't very well lift him into a buckboard against his will.

"Don't ask now, Buck," she pled. "Just trust me, won't you?"

"No," he answered curtly. "Talk! What's this all about?"

She struck her hands together frantically, at her wits' end for an excuse to get him out.

"I've just seen about forty men come into the valley, Buck. I know they mean to start trouble. You can't stay here alone."

"Why do you think they mean to start trouble?"

Helplessly, she blurted out the truth. "Jack Harmon's with them."

She saw Buck's face go deadly pale and his eyes begin to burn.

"Are you jokin'?" he demanded harshly. "Harmon's back? In this valley, here—now?"

She nodded. "It isn't a joke, Buck. He's here. You've *got* to be sensible—"

She broke off, staring fascinated at the man before her. The unleashed fury and hatred in his face awed her. She saw the veins of his forehead swell, the cords of his neck bulge, and then she witnessed something which seemed to her a miracle. Slowly, incredibly, he got up from his chair, stood upright on his legs.

Incredulous, dazed, she gasped, "Buck! You—you're standing up! Why—you're *walking.*"

He was. Slowly, with infinite pains, the marks of agonized effort written deep on his countenance he was walking! Without even the support of the wall to aid him! Harmon, the danger, the very purpose of her coming here were forgotten in her at that moment. Buck—her Buck—could walk again!

Instinctively, anxiously, she ran to him, put out her hand to help him, terrified lest on his tottering limbs he should fall and somehow injure himself. "Be—be careful, darling," she breathed.

His response shocked her, struck at her heart like a mortal blow until she realized that it was not meant for her. He was swearing, cursing bitterly and steadily under his breath, her presence forgotten. He was cursing his staggering, jerking legs as a mule driver curses his straining team—cursing his legs and himself and the very skies. But he was walking—and walking with a fierce relentless purpose.

Silent, immobile, divided between awe and joy, she watched him make his way to the wall where his loaded gun belt hung, dust covered. She saw him belt it on, watched him take his Winchester from the nails on which it rested. It was only then that he appeared to remember that she was there.

"Where is he?" he demanded, his voice hoarse yet somehow carrying, violent.

It jerked her back to the reality of their danger. "Buck, you don't understand," she said. "There are thirty or forty men with him. You can't fight a whole gang!"

"Where are they?" His voice was flat, droning, yet carrying with it an almost terrifying intensity.

"They were at the entrance to the valley. They'll be riding here soon; they may be here any minute. We must get to the log fort, where the others are."

For a second, he was silent, then, as though some cool vestige of common sense had broken through the emotion that gripped him, he said, "All right. Let's get there, then."

But the instant's intrusion of calm judgment betrayed him. He swayed, nearly fell, catching himself with the butt of the carbine as a crutch. Before she could rush to him, he had recovered, raging.

"I can do it," he muttered thickly. She saw that his face was covered with sweat, his eyes fierce, almost insane.

SLOWLY, with an effort which brought all her own muscles tight, he turned toward the door, began to walk with his stiff, marionette pace—out through the hall, onto the porch. Trying to go down the steps, he fell headlong.

With a little cry of horror and remorse because she had not dared help him, she rushed to him. He was crying, whimpering, cursing, in his helpless rage. But he paid no attention to the eager assistance of her hands. Beside himself, swearing blasphemously, he was getting to his feet alone, and, though she heaved against his weight, in the end she had the feeling that he had done it without any help whatever. She clung to his arm, though; lifting and supporting him as he made for the corral. The weight of him! She couldn't have believed that anyone could be so heavy.

He went first to his saddle, racked under the shed near the corral, and got his lariat, then foot by battled foot, he moved toward the corral-gate.

"Wait, Buck!" she cried. "They're not in the corral. I got them as I rode in, from the pasture. They're tied over there. . . ."

He paid her no attention. He was leaning against the corral, his teeth clamped over his under lip. "Oh, God," she thought, "what'll I do? He's *crazy!* And they're coming. They'll be here any minute!"

Then she saw that he was getting the gate open. He clung to the post and swung the gate back with a powerful sweep of his arm. Then, still clinging to the post, he shook out a loop, swung it

and threw. She saw it settle over the head of the palomino stallion.

Frantic, she ran to him, clutched his arm. "Buck! Buck, darling!" she cried. "You can't ride—don't try, Buck!"

Brooding, tight-mouthed, he looked down at her, as though half of him were still in some strange world of his own, apart from her and everything she knew.

"I can ride," he said. "Get my saddle and help me get it on. I can ride!"

Helplessly, under the compulsion of his gaze, she got the saddle, flung it on the back of the stallion. "He'll throw you —you can't ride him, Buck," she groaned. "At least take another horse."

"He won't buck with me," he said with somber assurance. "You'll have to help me get on."

He strained to pull himself up, jiggling with his feet as he tried to jump, and failed utterly. Gasping, despairing, she tried to lift his legs. Even with the help of his hands on the pommel and the palomino's neck, she could not do it. In the end, he made her help him over to the porch, and with her help he got into the saddle. For a moment, he swayed, but stuck there, and she ran for her horse, knowing in her heart that he must fall as soon as the horse moved.

Yet he did not fall. The stallion, eyes walling, nostrils flaring, trembling, behaved like a ladies' saddle hack, and the man himeslf, however feeble the grip of his knees, had the sure balance of the saddle-born-and-bred. Watching him, she had the sudden wild certainty, choked with tears, that he could have sat that horse without any legs at all!

So they rode, her heart in her mouth as the horses broke from trot to a lope and finally to a gallop. And in the distance behind them, a dust cloud grew, still faint but every second more ominous—destruction and red murder on the hoof.

CHAPTER SIX

Reckoning of Hate

OUTSIDE the improvised rodeo arena somebody squawked. Necks craned and then there was a sudden roar as the crowd recognized Buck McGee, astride a bronc again. Talking, exclaiming, questioning, the contests forgotten they gathered—Jud Bentley, staring and half-indignant; Ora Cowan, unbelieving, old Mrs. Gunther, the sudden tears of joy coursing down her cheeks—all the valley, astonished, but over-joyed, too.

Slim Varney drew a deep breath and swore. "On the palomino!" he exclaimed, staring. "By God, maybe he wasn't so loco after all!"

Buck held up his hand for silence and then turned to Linda. "You tell 'em," he said.

Linda shook her head. "No, Buck," she said softly. "You still rod the valley."

For a moment he looked at her, as though for the first time he was really aware of her presence. For a moment only, his eyes softened. "Do I, Linda?" he asked. "Do I?"

Dumbly, her eyes moist, she nodded.

He turned back to the crowd then, grim-mouthed, and told them.

It took a minute or two for them to really comprehend and believe. Then Jud Bentley said excitedly. "This is no place to meet them. We got to get to the head of the valley, where we got good cover and where the hills pertect our flanks. Get saddled, boys, and let's light out."

Ora Cowan bristled. "An' let 'em get all the spreads in between!" he exclaimed scornfully. "That's how much you think of the valley!"

"We got to fight it out here," he went on. "We can hole up in the log fort an' hold 'em off until the cows come home."

"Until we starve, you mean!" Jud cut

in with angry sarcasm. "That fort's a trap. Half of 'em can hem us in there, while the rest loot the valley. Hell, we wouldn't even have water!"

Buck said, "We aren't sure yet that they're lookin' for trouble. But it they are, it looks to me like you're both right. If we went up to the head of the valley, they could do as they please with all the spreads at this end. And we wouldn't even be sure of gettin' there. Traveling with the women and children, we'd be slowed up. They'd likely catch us before we got good started. An' if we try to stand 'em off here, we'll be surrounded, an' the valley'll be theirs."

He paused, his strained, white face thoughtful. The others held silence, knowing he was right but not seeing any way out of the dilemma.

"What do you say we try a trick on 'em?" Buck went on slowly after a moment. "Let's get the women and kids started over toward Rabbit Run Canyon —a couple of men can go with them, in case they're needed. The rest of us'll stay here and pretend we're goin' on with the games. A couple of the boys can be out in the arena, toppin' off some bad broncs. Half of the rest of us can play audience. That'll make it look like we didn't suspect anythin'. The other half'll get up on the roof of the log fort an' that little shack. If these jaspers keep to the trail —an' that's what they'll likely do, so as to appear innocent—it'll lead right between those two buildings. An' the buildings'll be between them and the arena, so they won't be able to see how slim the crowd is. When they come ridin' through, we can throw down on 'em an' find out what it's all about. Maybe there'll be no call to do any general shootin'—but if there is, we'll have 'em where we want 'em."

"That's thinkin', Buck," Hank Stuart, Linda's father, exclaimed. "Cripes, boy—it's good to have you back again!" And there was an immediate general murmur of assent.

"I reckon I'm not much good," Buck said painfully, "but I'll try to do my part. I—I want to say that I'm right sorry I've been the way I've been with you people. . . . I—"

"Forget it, son," Hank Stuart told him. "We knew what you was goin' through."

"If somebody'll help me down from my horse. . ." Buck said, embarrassed.

A dozen hands reached to help him, set him down, supported him as he swayed uncertainly on his legs.

"Never mind me," he warned. "You got to move fast."

They did move fast. The women and children were bundled into wagons and buckboards and sent off toward the canyon. The men moved to their designated positions, half to the roofs of the two buildings, the other half to the arena. Some of the latter borrowed their wives' hats and dresses, to add color and naturalness to the group of spectators, leaving their spouses to go off in petticoats.

Slim Varney grinned at one of the calico-attired husbands. "Lady," he observed, "you sure ain't in no danger from me." The group moved off, hoorawing one another, careless of the fact that in a few moments what seemed a comedy would turn into a hell of gun-smoke and sudden death.

ON THE roofs, the ambushers lay flat, Winchesters and six-guns at their sides. And up the valley, the cloud of dust thickened, moved nearer and nearer.

Buck, peering through a crevice in the parapet of the log-fort, roof, held his breath. It was possible to distinguish the riders now. There were nearly half a hundred of them, riding at a trot. There was a possibility that instead of coming on as they were, they would decide to

open hostilities by spreading out and swooping around the buildings at a gallop. In that case, Buck's hastily-conceived plan would be worthless; the men at the arena would be caught in the open, and the rest of them would be cooped up in the buildings, at the mercy of the attackers.

But the group, closely bunched, came on steadily. Within a hundred yards of the buildings, however, they slowed down suddenly. The man who rode in the lead and who, Buck was to learn, was Cummings, had his long nose in the air like a wolf who smells danger. It was as though he instinctively smelled a trap.

Yet the buildings looked utterly deserted. From the arena came the squealing of an enraged bronc and the shouts of the onlookers: "Ride him, cowboy!" "Look out, he's comin' apart!" "Whoopee! Balance all!"

And there were falsetto voices like those of women. No, it all sounded real enough. And yet. . . .

Then, evidently, the leader made up his mind that everything was as it should be. The column moved forward again at a trot, coming in between the buildings, as Buck had thought they would, because that was the natural way and also because the buildings would shield them from the arena until the last moment. Buck held his breath. They were going to fall into his trap, and, riding by the side of the leader, was Jack Harmon!

He waited until the column was well between the buildings, then he pulled himself to his knees.

"Get your hands high, hombres," his voice crackled out. "You're covered on every side!"

Big Nose Cummings pulled up, his horse rearing, his sharp eyes vivid with his racing thoughts. After all, they had done nothing here in the valley. It would be possible to talk their way out of it—claim that they were merely riding through, at least until they got a line on the situation. Some such consideration must have rushed through the outlaw's mind, in the second it took Buck to rap out his command. That, and a blinding, murderous suspicion that Jack Harmon had sold them out. His mouth opened to reply, but the words never got out.

Jack Harmon, riding white-faced and nervous-eyed at his side, could not afford to be taken here. In this valley, death watched for him like a wolf on the prowl. He cast one astounded, panic-stricken glance at the face which stared at him over the roof-parapet. Then his hand flashed desperately to the two guns strapped low on his thighs. They came up bellowing, blazing their message of hatred.

Big Nose Cummings showed himself a leader then. At Buck's voice, the shouting at the arena had stopped. The outlaw must have realized instantaneously that he was cut off on three sides, and realized also that Harmon's action had cut off any possibility of parley.

His hands raced for his guns as his voice cracked out, "Back! Back! Ride for your lives!" And his last word was punctuated by the double period of his thundering guns, smashing death at the rifles that looked at him over the roof's edge. As his Colts roared, his spurred horse whirled, plunging in the direction from which he had come. Whirled into gunsmoke, for the hard-eyed, ready-handed men who rode with him had not been tardy with their six-guns. They plunged into the screaming hell of toppling men and wounded, bucking horses as the guns from the roof stormed lead.

For a long moment, that space between the buildings was a pandemonium-filled charnel house. Half a hundred men and horses milled and shouted and went down in hideous tangle of panic, fear and death.

Red murder was meeting a fate as bloody as itself!

Then the jam broke, and those who could still do so fought to the open, their terrified mounts belly-down, half of them out of all control; their riders bending low to escape the whistling slugs that whined a grave-song round their ears.

At the arena, from the roofs, the valley men jumped for their horses. Buck, untouched by those two wild shots of Harmon's, swung himself desperately down from the roof, hanging by his hands and shouting to those below to catch him. He had seen Jack Harmon ride away, apparently unhit. And the hate-hell in his heart would have driven him to drop from a precipice to follow.

A voice shrilled, "Wait, Buck—don't drop!"

WONDERING, he looked down over his shoulder. Linda was there, running toward him from the door of the log fort. She must have hidden to escape going off with the other women. And behind her, waddling, face flushed and eyes snapping was old Mrs. Gunther. "Wait, Buck—we'll catch you!" she shrilled.

But Hank Stuart, looking at once outraged and unsurprised, surged in between, caught Buck in hickory-tough arms. "You did it, boy!" he yelled, exultantly. But Buck did not hear him. Jaw set, the veins leaping from his forehead, he was forcing his legs to walk—toward the palomino stallion. If anything could catch Jack Harmon, the stallion could.

"Help me on him," he shouted when he had gotten to the horse. "Damn you—help me on him!"

Linda was at his side, tugging at him, helping him to mount and in the same breath begging him not to. That time he got on—how, he never knew—but suddenly he was in the saddle, his feeble knees locked against the horse's flanks, his body swaying in rythm to the rocketing stride.

The outlaws had spread out, partly by design, partly because their horses were out of control. It was the best thing they could have done. Some were breaking for the hills on either side, others were racing down the valley. And among these, Buck located Jack Harmon.

Feebly he pricked the stallion's flanks with his spurs, felt the horse flatten, racing down the valley-floor like a thunder-bolt unleashed. He forgot his legs, forgot that he was riding, in defiance of all the rules of possibility, forgot everything except the need to overtake the flying figure ahead of him.

Once the stallion took a dry wash, sailing across it, arrow-like, then swerved sharply to avoid some bolder-backed brush. Buck McGee pulled leather then, for the first time in his life, but he managed to hang on, to stick and get his rhythm back. And ahead of him, Harman's red roan horse dropped back. . . . Buck was crawling up steadily.

Harmon, looking over his shoulder, knew that he was licked. No ordinary horse could stand up against that stallion—the deep-chested golden horse that had once been meant—though he never waited to find out—for him! And in that moment, he would have sold his soul for a mount like him.

"In six-gun range now," Buck muttered to himself, then, "Close in, boy!" At the whip of his voice the palomino jumped forward as another horse might have if he had been fed the steel, hard.

Harmon turned in his saddle, a Colt in his right hand. The report of the gun came thin and inconsiderable on the rushing wind of Buck's speed. There was the brief, venomous whine of a bullet over his head. Buck did not waver, made no movement toward his gun. His mouth

was set like a steel trap, his burning eyes fixed in a glare that was only half sane. Through long months, when he had thought he could never walk again, he had kept himself alive with the hope that Harmon might someday put himself within reach of his hands.

A thousand times, in imagination, he had felt his betrayer's throat under those hands, had heard the snap as his Adam's apple popped or his spine cracked under the upthrust of the thumbs. There would be no bullet for Jack Harmon—nor could any bullet ever molded stop Buck McGee before he had accomplished his purpose. He might have to carry lead in the center of his brain, but he would carry it long enough to get the strength of his hands around that treacherous throat!

The stallion was gaining on the winded roan now as though the latter horse were standing still, and the shrill, disappointed snarl of Harmon's missed shots was coming dangerously close. And still Buck made no movement towards his gun. It was not until fifteen paces separated them that he acted. Harmon turned then, his face vicious with fear and venom. He had emptied one gun. Now he brought the other down in a careful, deadly aim.

Buck's hand flashed to his hip, blurred up like a striking rattler's head, and belched sudden flame. Harmon's gun-hand snapped back, the bullet-driven Colt sailing clear of his horse's head, to strike the dirt ahead of him. Two seconds later the stallion was alongside of the roan and Buck's hands shot out.

Had he been sane, he would have ordered Harmon to pull up, but he did not wait for that. His fingers gripped like iron grappling hooks. He did not attempt to keep his seat in the saddle; he merely hung on to his enemy and let himself go.

Harmon screamed once, like a terrified animal and came, clawing frantically, out of the saddle, as the startled horses swerved. Buck could have rolled, but to do that would have meant letting go his grip. Instead, he held on, and the pair hit the ground with a terrific thud which drove the wind from them both. Even then, only one of Buck's hands was shaken loose. The other held.

Harmon lay half unsconcious and gasping, while Buck glared and fought for breath. And it was Buck who regained control of his breathing and his muscles first. His other hand reached out and caught Harmon's throat. He looked into the terrified eyes of his victim and said slowly and savagely, "I'm goin' to teach you not to shoot your friends in the back, you murderin', double-crossin' pole-cat."

HIS other hand shifted to the throat and tightened also; tightened slowly, terribly. The breath which had been knocked out of Harmon would never come back. His frantic, craven, pleading eyes told that he knew it.

Buck saw the red blood darken in his enemy's face, begin to purple. The terrified eyes glazed. He thought, "In a second, when he's about to lose consciousness, I'll pop it. I'll teach him—"

Teach him? He'd be beyond teaching in a moment—and beyond friends! And suddenly Buck felt empty. Against his will, against the terrific set of this long purpose of his, his hands relaxed. What would he prove by killing this man? And with the thought, Harmon's face, half-seen through the red mist of hatred in Buck's eyes, came suddenly clear. This had been his friend. He had looked into those terrified, congested features before him with love, with trust, in laughter and good-fellowship.

And after all, what had Harmon done? He had merely shot him, Buck, in the back. That wasn't so much. Buck McGee wasn't so much. One man, whose

death or life didn't matter at all. No doubt, Harmon had had to do it, after his humiliation because life had made him, somehow, into that kind of a skunk. But an injury to Buck McGee didn't necessarily merit death. Who was Buck McGee?

Less clearly—confusedly glimpsed rather than phrased—the thoughts raced through Buck's mind as his hands relaxed, went limp—came free of the tortured throat.

"I should have shot him," he groaned. "I could have done that." But he knew clearly now that he could not do this other thing. And he knew that now he would not even be able to shoot him.

Slowly, with infinite pain, he struggled to his feet. His back felt wrenched, he must have hurt it in falling. It took him a long while to get erect, but when he did, he found that, somehow, his legs felt freer. They trembled with weakness but they obeyed him less jerkily. He wondered if the shock, the twist of his back, had somehow helped him.

Harmon lay looking at him wonderingly, the color in his face almost normal again. "Get up!" Buck commanded harshly.

Harmon got to his feet, with a grimace of agony. The hang of one arm told Buck that his shoulder blade had been broken in the fall.

"You're a skunk an' a side-winder," Buck told him, hard-eyed, "but I'm lettin' you live. God knows why! Git—before I change my mind. Start walkin' out of this valley an' don't come back, unless you want a fast trip to hell!"

Jack Harmon looked at him. "I never was much good, I reckon," he said slowly, "but you won't ever kill me, Buck." His eyes had the puzzled look of a man confronted with something he could not quite understand and yet had a glimmering of. " I don't know just why. Maybe it's because you're able to be a friend, an' I reckon a man who's able to be that ain't ever quite able to be anythin' less. I—I reckon I'm sorry I did what I did."

He straightened himself, wincing, and turned away, with an attempt at bravado.

"Well, see you in hell," he said.

Buck watched him plod off, trying to hold himself carelessly, yet not managing it. He had an idea that Jack Harmon had learned something in those few moments, not just about Buck McGee but about Jack Harmon.

A horseman angled out from the direction of the hills, riding hard. Buck recognized the outlaw leader and his hand went toward his six-gun. But he did not draw it. Somehow, he didn't want any more killing that day—he didn't know why. He said to himself, "Hell, I'm tired. Let it go!"

Big Nose Cummings kept a wary eye on Buck but he rode directly towards Jack Harmon. Harmon turned to meet him, apprehensively. The outlaw pulled his horse to a rearing halt and though his was yards away, his voice came plainly to Buck. "So it was a double-cross after all, Harmon! I thought so, when they cracked down on us. An' now I see you having a little friendly confab with one of 'em."

Buck saw Harmon's face go deadly white, and then the outlaw said, "Just keep walkin' the way you were. Go on—"

Harmon looked at him and his lips moved as though he was about to say something, but he turned his back and started on.

The Big Nose Cummings stuck his Colt into Harmon's back and pulled the trigger.

AUTOMATICALLY, Buck's hand shuttled to his holster, in that smooth flashing draw of his, as the outlaw turned his smoking gun on Buck. The report

rang out double—thundered again. Cummings swayed, his free hand going to his chest. He tried to raise his drooping Colt. He coughed once and pitched forward on his face.

Buck looked wonderingly at the smoking gun in his hand. He had not even been aware of drawing and firing.

After a moment, he turned and looked hopelessly toward the palomino stallion, who was watching him, startled, from a distance of several hundred yards. He felt pretty sure that the horse would not let his get up to him. And he felt unutterably weary. He did not go over and look at Jack Harmon's fallen body. He knew too certainly that that shot had broken his spine.

He looked in the other direction and saw three riders coming toward him, one some distance behind the others. The first two were Jud Bentley and Ora Cowan. They looked flushed and excited and a little embarrassed.

Jud Bentley said, "Glad you're all right, Buck. We was worried about you."

"Buck said, "I'm all right."

"Buck, you shore had the right idea," Ora said heartily. "You saved this valley plenty of hell, if you ask me."

"Boy!" Jud exclaimed. "You shore said it then!"

Buck shrugged. "It was lucky, I guess."

The other two were silent a minute, looking at one another uneasily. Then Ora said, like a man plunging into cold water, "Jud an' me have been talkin' it over, Buck. We—we been kind of fussin' over some water rights. We figgered that we'd kind of put it up to you an' let you settle it."

Jud grinned sheepishly. "Wouldn't wonder if we both hadn't been gittin' too big for our boots. Seems like a McGee allus did run this valley. Reckon you better keep right on at it."

Buck felt his throat choke up. "Hell," he said huskily. "I got no right to run anything."

But he knew then that what he had wanted more than killing Jack Harmon was the peace of Thunder Valley. That, and something else that came thundering up to him then, on a fast-going paint pony, and hit the ground on small, trim boots at his feet.

"Buck, oh Buck!" Linda said.

And after a long time Buck raised his head and looked across her golden red hair at Jud and Ora.

"Hell!" he complained. "Don't you buzzards even know enough to look the other way?"

THE END

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(Author of "Hangman's Deputy," etc.)

There's nothing so desolate and dead as a ghost mining town—nothing so pathetically pitiful as the futile, tragic helplessness of fighting men grown old. But the rusty, long-silent guns of the aged may, when Fate chooses and the cause is right, bring back for a little while the hell-roaring life to vacant streets and empty buildings—and the glory of youth to ancient, tired eyes!

THE dying campfire framed in shadows the hard-bitten faces of the six desert riders; its light mirrored redly the greed and sardonic amusement in their hard eyes. They were listening to the plaintive protests of the two oldsters, while they were robbing the old men of the gold that meant to them more than life itself.

The oldsters' names were Gabe Tuttle

and Bill Cole. Gabe was a fat-bellied, squint-eyed, gray-whiskered little old man. Bill was tall and gaunt, the gloominess of his seamed and bony face enhanced by snow-white longhorn mustaches that drooped on each side of his thin-lipped mouth.

"It ain't," Bill declared earnestly, "that we crave anything for ourselves. But that mineral, now—it sorta belongs to somebody else, so to speak."

"It belongs," Gabe had a thin, squeaky voice, "to a kid—a curly-haired little tike no more'n three year old. Cute as a picture, too. Surely you hombres wouldn't—"

Harsh grins of derision creased the faces of the six who had ridden out of the desert.

"We don't like bed-time yarns, gran'-dad," the black-bearded, thin-faced leader, laughed. "We need this gold, and we're takin' it. You ol' coots are lucky we're lettin' yuh live."

"We'd ruther die than lose that mineral, at that," said Bill desperately. "Gabe, you tell 'em what that gold means."

Gabe's fat-rimmed eyes probed anxiously at the harsh, dust-filmed faces about him.

The desert renegades stirred restlessly. "Hell!" rapped a spiderish, one-eyed rider. "Let's beef these ol' sand-rats and slope. It's goin' tuh storm."

"Not so fast," Gabe begged. "About this gold. Forty years me and Bill has been pards, huntin' gold. Fightin' the desert, slavin', starvin', burnin'. Wasn't never much pay-dirt, but it didn't matter so much the first fifteen years, for we was young and footloose. Then—"

One of the outlaws made as if to interrupt, but the hawk-faced leader, grinning wickedly, silenced him.

"Then," Bill chimed, "me and Gabe got married! Got hitched the same day, to a coupla the purtiest gals west o' the Missoury. We lived in the same town, still teamed up tryin' to lick the desert. But it wasn't long, after me and Sarah married, till the baby boy was born."

"A boy," Gabe agreed, "tuh Bill and his woman. Mine and Molly's was a girl, born a year after Bill's. But me and Bill was still partners, just like our women. So when Molly up and died ten years after the kid was born, Bill's woman soon followed.

"My girl and Bill's boy growed into a mighty handsome couple. And, as was natural, when they growed up they was sweethearts and got married. Then, three years ago, the little tike was born. Blue-eyed, with curly yellow hair—yuh never saw a handsomer kid than mine and Bill's gran'son. Curly's his name. I guess me and Bill love Curly more'n we ever did even our own."

"But Curly," said Bill sadly, as Gabe paused, "ain't like other kids. He can't move his legs. He won't never romp and play like other kids, not till he goes back East and has a' operation. If he could have that operation, now. . . ."

"They said they could cure 'im," Gabe agreed. "But it'd cost a lot o' money—three thousand dollars. And Joe and Betty, which is mine and Bill's kids, ain't got it. Joe works hard in the mines, but he maybe never could save that much.

"So me and Bill decided to do somethin' about it. We're gettin' old, I guess. But we decided to have one more try at the desert, fer the kid. And we won! After forty years, we made our strike. There's enough mineral in them two bags to send the kid back East for that operation—and some left over to buy me and Bill a little spread where we c'n settle down and raise a few calves and chickens. Seems like we don't crave nothin' but peace lately, and two good legs fer that curly-haired kid to romp about on."

"And now," Bill complained bitterly, "you hombres're stealin' that gold which

was to buy the kid's legs. Maybe, if yuh do that, he won't never walk. Maybe me and Gabe won't never hit pay-dirt no more. And th' boy's jest *got* to walk, like other kids—"

"Well, that's too bad," the hawk-faced renegade leader laughed. "But we're still takin' them bags."

GABE'S squinty eyes encountered Bill's worried gaze, and a terse message flashed between them. Seemed like there wasn't much they could do. Two old six-guns, their only weapons, were in the pack lying near by on the ground. The hard-eyed men, riding suddenly out of the desert twenty minutes before, had caught them flat-footed. They hadn't expected treachery.

Bill and Gabe were getting old, and they wanted peace. But once Gabe Tuttle's name had been known from Snake River to the Border; once Bill Cole had been known as "Powder Smoke Bill" Cole. They were blood and bone of the old West, a breed of men made of rawhide and steel and raw red courage.

"Hombres," Bill's voice was suddenly ragged with anger, "yuh can't have thet material!"

"Not the kid's gold!" Gabe squeaked, and dived with amazing agility for the pack on the ground.

Bill's lanky body uncoiled. His bony fists slammed savagely into the big leader's face. The hawk-faced hombre went down, snarling furiously. He clawed for his gun, and it came up with a coughing blast of flame and smoke.

Bill reeled back, one hand clawing at his forehead. Blood spurted from under his fingers, dying his white mustaches. Then Bill slumped to the sand.

Gabe had made it to the pack, and was digging frantically for the guns when something slammed with pile-driving force against his skull. He never saw the one-eyed man standing over him with clubbed gun, didn't hear the renegade's grisly chuckle as he holstered the weapon.

The big leader got to his feet, clawing sand from his beard.

"Fire-eatin' ol' cusses!" He stared with cruel eyes at the unconscious figures.

"Maybe I oughta put another bullet in 'em," One-eye suggested.

"Hell, they're harmless! Well, let's ride. 'Less I'm wrong, a sand-storm's blowin' up. We oughta make Gomorrah 'fore it hits."

The burly leader placed the two heavy buckskin bags of gold dust and nuggets in his own saddlebags. The six mounted figures rode out of the scarlet circle of firelight. . . .

IN THE gray light of dawn, Gabe blinked bewilderedly. Searing pain stabbed at his head. He raked a hand dazedly across his aching eyes.

Then he saw Bill sprawled on the sand a few feet away, dried blood staining his bony face. Gabe remembered. He rolled to his feet, hastened to Bill's side, knelt.

Bill was alive; the bullet had slashed a trench along his skull. "Too tough and ornery to die!" Gabe muttered relievedly.

He secured their one canteen, sloshed water over Bill's gray face. After a while, Bill reared up suddenly, ready to start fighting where he'd left off several hours before.

Calmly, but with heavy hearts, they took stock. The six renegades had taken the precious bags of gold, but nothing else. The two battered six-guns were in the pack. The pack burro grazed near by. The one canteen of water, a little food, was intact.

The sun rose, shooting crimson shafts of light across the empty land. The desert was silent, still, desolate.

A sort of stunned grief in their squinty old eyes, Bill and Gabe stared at each

other. They were a little bewildered, as if unable to grasp fully the terrible thing that had happened.

Their mineral, the gold that was to buy new legs for a crippled, laughing, curly-haired boy, was gone!

Their eyes hardened. Anger and vengeance-lust gripped them. In their hearts was no thought of defeat, no thought of losing their gold without a fight to the death. Without that gold, they knew they could never go back and face Joe and Betty—and Curly.

After a while, Bill got slowly to his feet.

"I guess we better be goin', Gabe!"

"Yeah, I guess we had, Bill."

Just that. Carefully they oiled the old single-action six-guns, loaded them, placed fresh cartridges in their pockets. They strapped the pack on the gray burro. Then, grim-eyed, they set off across the desert, following the trail left by the hard-faced men who had robbed them.

They followed the trail northward, but after a few miles it turned abruptly to the east. The desert, empty and sear, stretched on all sides. The rays of the sun, beating mercilessly from a brassy sky, scorched them. A slow wind, tormented by heat, cracked their skin.

Doggedly the oldsters punched the burro on. They drank sparingly of their meager supply of water. They were desert men, they knew the desert's peril. They had no idea where the outlaw trail was leading them. It didn't matter. Memories of a wistful, curly-haired youngster who had never walked, drove them on.

Fierce anger against the men who had robbed them crowded some of the despair from their hearts. They quickened their pace, their withered lips tightened. Bitterness roiled in their hearts. Rejuvenating strength flowed through their bodies.

The slow wind died, leaving the desert breathless, sullen. Bill and Gabe knew a sand-blizzard was brewing.

At mid-evening, the trail of the renegades dipped into a far-flung basin of snow-white sand that boiled with heat. Bill and Gabe knew that waterless expanse of sun-tortured sand. The Devil's Garden—a funnel for sand-blizzards that howled like legions of hungry-gutted wolves.

The oldsters surveyed the basin with heat-seared eyes.

"Them ornery skunks crossed it," said Gabe. "Folks don't cross the Garden fer fun. Where yuh guess they're headin', Bill?"

"Gomorrah!"

"Gomorrah," Gabe agreed.

They went down into the basin.

Their first warning was a low moaning sound in the distance. They looked, saw that a yellowish pall had hidden the eastern horizon. A hot breeze blew up; then the wind screamed full-force across the Devil's Gardens, bringing with it a writhing wall of yellow sand.

Bill and Gabe took refuge under the lee of a big sandstone boulder. Impatience and bitterness gnawed at their hearts at the delay. But they knew better than to buck the sand.

The moan became a roar. The air grew thick. Bill and Gabe covered their heads with a blanket from the pack, and waited. The hollow bellowing of the sand seemed to fill the world. Often they were forced to lift the blanket to avoid being buried alive.

They talked little. Now they had time to think. Each knew the bitterness, the worry, that was in the other's heart. They even joked a little about the gold, not letting on that there was any doubt but what they'd get it back.

But they knew the Herculean task confronting them. Their water was about gone. The storm might last an hour—it

might last several days. And many dry miles lay before them.

Even if they came up with the renegades, their only reward probably would be death. For from "Wanted" notices seen in desert towns, they had recognized the outlaw leader as Ace Krug, boss of one of the fiercest gangs of desert raiders in Arizona. On Krug's shaggy head was a thousand dollar bounty, and only slightly less was offered for his hard-eyed henchmen.

A good many years ago, when Gabe Tuttle's name was spoken with awe and his lanky partner was known as Powdersmoke Bill Cole, they would have asked no odds of Ace Krug's killer pack. They asked none now. All they asked was an even break. They'd get back Curly's gold —or go out with the gunsmoke in their eyes.

THE red sun vanished. Hours passed. Darkness swooped down suddenly, a windy, whispery darkness. The storm roared and screamed unchecked across the level floor of the Devil's Garden, unleashing its fury on the two old derelicts who crouched with seething impatience underneath their blanket.

All night the blizzard raged. Before dawn Bill and Gabe swallowed the last of their water. They tried to eat, but sand made gritty mush of the food.

A while before noon the next day the storm blew itself out.

The oldsters threw off their blanket, blinking painfully in the sparkling sunshine. Glaring white dunes rolled to the horizons. The Devil's Garden was empty, still, alluringly beautiful.

But beneath the unearthly beauty, the oldsters, knew, death waited.

The burro had vanished. Drifting sand had covered the trail left by Krug's renegades. Gabe gazed speculatively to the northeast, and said: "Them hombres made Gomorrah 'fore the sand hit, I guess. It's over there a piece. You reckon we'll make her, Bill?"

"I don't see why not, Gabe. We've seen worse trails. Well, I guess we better be travelin' on."

"On to Gomorrah," agreed Gabe grimly.

They trudged on. Soon thirst clawed at their throats. The sun beat down fiercely. The basin boiled with heat. The sunglare from the white sand stabbed like needles at their eys. By mid-evening every drop of water had been sucked from their bodies.

But slowly, doggedly, Bill and Gabe crossed the flaming basin. Never, even in their youth, had they made a worse trek. But never, they knew, had the stakes been so great.

Fresh anger and determination flowed like fire through their hearts. All the hoarded affection of their lonely lives had been lavished on that crippled boy. They had concealed from Joe and Betty the grief that knifed at them because Curly couldn't romp and ride like other kids. But it had grown and festered.

Their youth had never known the fierce joy that possessed them, a month ago, when they uncovered the pocket of gold in the desert. New, sound legs for Curly!

There was no rest. On and on, they went, through a searing hell of sand and heat. Their legs grew heavy, thirst swelled their lips and tongues. Their brains reeled from the heat.

But theirs wasn't the breed to admit defeat. One thing beat at their brains: they had to retrieve the gold.

THE sun was suddenly gone. Inky shadows flowed over the desert. Darkness.

Almost at once a full moon swung into the sky, bathing the Devil's Garden in a weird, fiery brilliance. But the oldsters

didn't see the barbaric beauty about them; they saw only the misery and death that haunted the place.

Few men could have crossed the Devil's Garden without water, and lived. But Bill and Gabe had crossed it. They made it to Gomorrah.

Gabe saw it first. He stopped. He tried to say somthing, but his tongue was too thick and dry. He pointed.

Gaunt and gray in the moonlight, Gomorrah huddled on the desert before them. Once Gomorrah, like a quarrelsome young bull, had roared and seethed with life. Lights had blazed in the new shacks. Gold had changed hands recklessly over bar and gambling table. Men had laughed, quarreled, died in its crooked street.

Now it was deserted, its sun-blasted shacks half-covered by the encroaching sand, their loose shutters flapping noisily in the wind, paneless windows gaping blackly. A ghostly monument to golden dreams that had died too soon. . . .

At the far end of Gomorrah's one street a nest of cliffs reared abruptly. Among these cliffs was a spring of cool, sweet water that never flowed dry.

Stumbling in their eagerness, Bill and Gabe went along the street. They knew about the spring, knew every foot of Gomorrah. For Gomorrah had known them when they both were young and eager with the rich joy of living.

But suddenly Bill dove for the shadows of a gaunt building, pulling Gabe with him. Bill pointed. Across the street a window glowed yellow with light. Voices, loud, boisterous, came to them.

The oldsters slunk among the ghostly buildings, made it to the spring among the cliffs. They lay on their stomachs and drank slowly, gratefully. They were silent for a while, feeling the life flow back into their withered bodies.

A while later, watching warily for members of Ace Krug's gang who might be prowling, they stood on an out-jutting ledge and looked down upon Gomorrah.

The night wind whispered among the shadowy buildings, as if Gomorrah stirred with memories. For a few moments, as they stood there with dreamy eyes, forty years fell from the shoulders of Bill and Gabe. They were young again. . . . Lights glowed in Gomorrah's shiny buildings; the street teemed with roughly-dressed, swaggering men and painted women. Maybe there was a sudden swirl of excitement, blows, curses, a gunshot.

Almost, they could hear words: "The hombre with the fancy vest and fifty dollar boots? Thet's young Gabe Tuttle, the biggest and squarest gambler in Arizony. He jest cut high card fer $5,000—and won." Or maybe it was: "There's Gomorrah's marshal, Powdersmoke Bill Cole—the fastest gent with a six-gun in the Territory!"

Burning days; wild, roiling, reckless nights—strong men and weak. There, life had been at its quickest. Ghosts of dead men again stalked Gomorrah's empty street. Gold and blood—one followed the other!

The Biblical city of Gomorrah, the oldsters knew, had been doomed because of its wickedness. This modern Gomorrah had been wicked. Now. . . .

A SLAMMED door, down in the moon-lit ghost-town, jarred Bill and Gabe back to reality. They saw a squat figure shuffling along the street, only to vanish between two buildings.

The oldsters shook their heads to clear them. "That hombre," Bill muttered, "may be headin' fer the spring."

Quickly they slid off the ledge, and crouched behind a boulder back ten feet from the spring. They no longer dreamed of their youth. They waited, grim-eyed, the rough fingers of each clutching a long-barreled old six-gun.

Minutes passed. A weird silence gripped Gomorrah, except for the chill wind that snaked among the buildings, or the occasional banging of a loose shutter or door. In one of the shacks below, grotesque, moving figures were etched against a lighted window. The squat man didn't reappear.

"Musta been a ghost," Gabe breathed, "disappearin' like that."

Something hard bored into his fat back, and a voice grated harshly: "I'll make ghosts outa you both, if yuh don't reach quick and high!"

The two oldsters' bodies stiffened. Slowly they straightened.

"Turn," rapped the voice. "Gimme them guns!"

Gabe turned quickly. With the same movement, he jabbed viciously upward with his old gun. The muzzle caught the squat man squarely under the chin. His shaggy head snapped back, he snarled with quick pain and surprise, reeled crazily. Then he braced himself, snaked his gun upward for a shot.

But Bill leaped in, slashed downward with his gun-barrel. The squat man went down, lay still.

"One less skunk to smell," said Bill, with satisfaction. "Musta seen us up there on the ledge."

"What'll we do with him?" Gabe asked.

Bill thought hard. His roving eyes fastened on a pail which the squat man had placed on the ground a few yards away, before sneaking up on them.

"This hombre was after water. When he don't come back, Ace Krug'll be out lookin' fer him. We better hide him."

"Yeah, but where?"

"Remember the Silver Slipper, don't yuh?"

Gabe's eyes lighted. "Jest the place," he chuckled.

They seized the unconscious man, one at each end, and lugged him down into the ghost-town. A block from the lighted shack, they paused before a dilapidated building. The door groaned weirdly as they opened it. Everything was dusty inside.

Once it had been a barroom. A bar hemmed one end of the big room. Two or three worm-eaten tables, and chairs, remained as they had been left, forty years ago. Once gold and whiskey and ribald revelry had held sway in the Silver Slipper.

Bill and Gabe went behind the crumbling bar. They lifted a trap-door in the floor, slid the squat man down into the musty-smelling cellar underneath. They tore strips from his dirty shirt, bound his ankles and wrists, gagged him, left him lying on the earthen floor, and returned to the room above.

For a moment they peered about the room that was half-lighted by a gray shaft of moonlight seeping through a window. Memories rustled in their brains. In this very room, one night, young Gabe Tuttle had won a fortune in dust—and had lost it on the turn of a card. And had laughed at his fickle luck.

"And at that table over there," old Gabe recalled, "was where Bull Slade sat when yuh come in to arrest 'im, Bill. 'I ain't much shucks with a gun,' sneers Bull, 'but with my fists I kin whup hell outa any damn marshal what walks on two laigs!' That was a fight, by Godfrey! And yuh licked 'im, Bill, till his own mother wouldn't uh knowed 'im."

"We was young roosters then, Gabe," said Bill quietly. "Now we're old—and them outlaw skunks has got th' kid's gold!"

"I'd almost forgot!" Anger flamed anew in Gabe's eyes. "We got to—"

"Listen!" Bill whispered.

Footsteps were clumping along the board sidewalk outside. The oldsters crept to the door, peered out. A man

was walking along the sidewalk, coming toward them.

Bill nudged Gabe. Again gnarled fingers gripped their old gun butts. "No noise, now," Gabe warned. "No noise!"

The man, a lanky, red-whiskered hombre, came on toward the shack where the oldsters crouched inside the doorway, his eyes probing into the shadowy alleys. Just as he came even with them, the strong wind swung the open door, causing it to creak harshly.

The lanky man stopped, whirled nervously, hand on gun. His eyes bored into the dark shack. Then he shrugged, muttered something, stared along the gray street.

Suddenly the renegade lifted his voice, called: "Bert! Bert! Where the hell are yuh?"

The wind, nosing among the ghostly shacks, laughed mockingly.

"Never did like this grave-yard fer a hideout!" the outlaw muttered. And again his eyes darted nervously about.

"Now!" Bill whispered.

He popped onto the sidewalk, Gabe at his heels, guns leveled.

The lanky outlaw squawked with amazement. He writhed aside, his hand stabbing downward. Bill swung, missed. But Gabe, sliding in close, didn't miss. His gun-barrel, arcing expertly, smashed the tall man to the ground.

"Never did miss often," he grinned, "like some folks!"

"The moon was in my eyes," Bill defended. "'Grab a'hold—maybe they'll be huntin' this 'un next."

The lanky man joined the burly one in the cellar.

FOR a while Bill and Gabe crouched there in the old barroom, peering through a window along the street. The wind had strengthened. It sent white dust clouds whirling along the street; it caused Gomorrah's shacks to creak and groan and rustle like restless skeletons. The moon shed an eerie, wolf-gray pall.

Finally Bill stirred uneasily. He got to his feet. "Guess maybe I'll look around a bit," he decided. "'Somethin' might happen to that gold."

"What yuh figurin' to do, Bill?"

"Jest look about a bit. Won't take long to get th' lay o' the land. Then I'll be back. You wait."

Gabe didn't protest. Bill was able to take care of himself. Now they each had two guns—their own battered Colts, and the ones taken from the captured outlaws.

Bill slid his lanky body through a back doorway. He snaked his way stealthily among the shadowy shacks, approached the building which contained what was left of Ace Krug's killer gang.

Silently he wriggled on his stomach to a spot under the lighted window, eased himself up and peered into the room. It was a barroom, like the one he'd just left. But blankets and packs littered the floor. A lantern set on the bar. A fire crackled in a rude fireplace.

Three men were in the room. The big bandit, Ace Krug. A fat, sullen-faced man with yellowish eyes; and a lithe, swarthy breed, who was holding a frying-pan over the blaze.

Sudden anger rolled over Bill Cole. Ace Krug sat on a box, his big hands rising and falling into the open mouths of two buckskin bags on the floor before him. The burly renegade grinned as he watched the golden streams cascade from his thick fingers.

A silent snarl curled Bill's bristly lips, his fingers wrapped fiercely about a gun-butt. The gold for which he and Gabe had slaved and burned—the gold that was to buy new legs for the kid! Furious anger shook the oldster. He battled an impulse to smash his six-gun through the

window and blast away at the human snakes who had robbed him.

But that, he knew, would be foolish. He'd sneak back, get Gabe, return. Then things would happen!

Abruptly Bill's eyes were wary, suspicious, as they probed about the room. There should have been four men, not three, in that room. Where was the spiderish, one-eyed hombre . . . ?

Bill heard a sudden footstep behind him. He whirled. The one-eyed renegade had come suddenly around a rear corner of the shack. He saw Bill crouched there under the window.

One-eye stopped, stood with head hunched forward, peering through the gloom, hand on gun.

"That you, Bert?" he rasped. "What yuh doin' there?"

Old Bill reared up, hand snaking for his gun. One-eye cursed wildly, his gun flamed redly. Bill snarled as the bullet snapped past his head. His own gun blasted.

But One-eye had leaped back around the corner, was squalling a warning to the men inside the shack.

Bill thought fast. Hell was fixin' to bust loose. He couldn't remember ever running from a gun-fight; but now, he knew, was the time to run. His eyes darted about.

The back end of the alley was blocked by One-eye. Bill whirled, slid along the alley, cleared the board sidewalk and bounded up the dusty street. He heard a door open behind him; dirty light streamed into the street. And then he heard One-eye yell: "There he goes! Let 'im have it!"

One-eye came from the alley. Ace Krug, the fat outlaw and the breed leaped together into the street. Their guns started pounding.

Bill stumbled suddenly, tried to regain his balance, sprawled in the dust. He reared up on one knee, a kicking gun in his fist.

Gabe saw him fall. With the first gunshot, the paunchy oldster had leaped to the doorway. He saw Bill bound along the street, the four renegades following him with wolfing guns, saw Bill go down like he was bad hit.

The moon-drenched street rocked redly before Gabe's eyes. Vengeance fires boiled in his heart. The skunks had got Bill!

CASTING discretion aside, Gabe leaped into the street. Gun in hand, shouting encouragement, he ran toward Bill. Bullets from the renegades' guns snapped past his head, kicked up tiny geysers of dust about his feet. But he kept going.

He gained Bill's side. Bill was still on one knee, triggering his hot gun, flinging bullet-defiance at the oncoming outlaws.

"They get yuh bad, Bill?" Gabe asked anxiously.

"Ain't tetched me," Bill snapped. "I stumbled!"

Joy surged through Gabe. He whirled. His old Colt snaked up, bellowed. Ace Krug and his three henchmen were stalking up the center of the street, firing as they came.

They heard Ace bellow above the booming guns: "Cut 'em down, gunies! It's them blasted ol' sand-rats—gunsmoke'll strangle 'em!"

The fat outlaw went down first, wallowing like a butchered hog in the street, his sullen face ghastly in the moonlight. But the other three kept coming.

Side by side, the oldsters faced Ace Krug's killers, and the deep-throated thunder from their guns rolled over Gomorrah. Shoulder to shoulder, as they had lived and fought for forty years, they scorned to seek shelter from screaming bullets. A fierce, rejuvenating joy surged through their old hearts as their guns coughed their red dirge of death.

The wind moaned and swirled along Gomorrah's dusty street, clattered among the ghostly shacks. Gun-thunder rolled across the desert. The spirit of the old ghost-town, forty years at rest, must have roused from its dust-drugged slumber and stared—for Gomorrah, even in its ribald youth, had never witnessed such a gun-fight as this!

Now the breed was down, writhing in the dust.

But still Ace Krug and the spiderish One-eye stalked along the street. A bullet had taken Krug's hat away. His shaggy mane was wild in the wind; his hawkish features, moon-splashed, were distorted with fury.

Bill staggered suddenly, his gun faltered. He went to his knees again, but reared up, braced himself and lifted his hot gun, and its bellow mingled with the battle-cry of his youth that echoed suddenly along the street. *"Powder River—let 'er buck!"*

His long, snow-white mustaches bristled fiercely. Once again he was Powder-smoke Bill Cole, marshal of wild Gomorrah.

Bill Cole and Gabe Tuttle—the pair Gomorrah had called unbeatable! They stood, gunsmoke writhing about their grim old figures, venting with crimson-jetting guns their hatred for the renegades who had stolen the kid's gold.

And One-eye went down, his face in the bitter dust.

Ace Krug stopped. He stared along the street, seemingly aware for the first time that he stood alone, amazed. He saw the stark bodies of his henchmen, and sudden fear supplanted the amazement in his snakish eyes.

He lifted his gun, cursed as the plunger bit into empty chambers. An animal whimper in his throat, he flung the weapon aside, grabbed another. Gun roaring, he started backing with frantic haste along the street.

But Ace Krug walked dead on his feet. He stopped suddenly. As if weary, he sank slowly to the ground.

Gomorrah was still and old again, as if finding its brief return to youth too wearying.

Bill and Gabe peered along the street. They holstered their guns. Their rage had spent itself.

"They get yuh bad?" Gabe asked again, anxiously.

Bill had a clean hole through his shoulder that was bleeding, but wasn't dangerous. He waited till his grimace of pain had vanished, then said: "Jest a scratch, Gabe! They hit you?"

"Never tetched me!" Gabe chuckled. And added: "I allus said you was too tough and ornery to die, Bill!"

Gabe wiped the powder-grime from his face with his tattered shirt sleeve.

Bill said: "Well, we showed 'em. Maybe, now, we'll have some peace."

"Peace," Gabe agreed, "and a new set o' legs fer the kid."

"Yeah, legs fer the kid. His ol' gran'dads'll see to that, I guess!"

They stared again along the quiet street. The cool wind washed against their faces. A sigh rustled among the gaunt shacks, as if Gomorrah was whispering to them.

A New Magazine

June Issue

DIME ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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By WILLIAM F. BRAGG
(Author of "Death Camps on Blizzard Basin," etc.)

COWMAN'S

Brazos Red needed a meal, and needed it badly, or he would have ridden on past that smelly sheepcamp into the safety of cowland hills. For woollies spell trouble in any cowboy's language—and well Red knew that sheepherder food is often paid for in bushwhack lead, that mutton for supper is too often sauced with treachery and blood.

ON THE buffalo grass of Dutch Flats, Brazos Red skirted the flank of a band of sheep, spread out for grazing. Ewes and lambs in the rear fed quietly, but from the lead arose a high column of dust, and a confused medley of dismal bleating and jangling bells. Accustomed as he was to punching

BLUFF

A Fast-Moving Novel of the Wyoming Sheep Frontiers

cattle, the antics of the fat muttons puzzled Red.

He wrinkled his sunbaked, snub nose in an arrogant sniff. Sheep—crazy actin' as usual—same as the gents who own and herd them, he thought! For like most punchers, Red firmly believed all sheepherders crazy. But whatever it might be that was bothering the woolies, he figured that it shouldn't interfere with his chances of lining up a sack of grub, and maybe a feed of oats for the pony.

He needed food as did his weary horse. For long days and nights he had ridden the long trail like a coyote ahead of the hounds. On his red head was set a re-

ward of $5,000, dead or alive. He was badly wanted in New Mexico on charges of first degree murder, and he knew that every peace officer between Mexico and Canada had been so informed. Hence Red's hurry, and his rushed last meal which had consisted of a jack-rabbit killed in the badlands.

But that was so long ago, Red took up another notch in his belt, took it gingerly in fear that it would push his stomach up against his backbone and bust something.

Well, where a man saw sheep, a camp stocked with food would be near. Cowpunchers might disdain following the woolies but all envied the high-class grub provided for shepherds. So Red determined to slip around the herd, locate the camp, stock up with man and horse provisions, and head north without delay into the mountain foothills north of these flats.

He steered his pony past a low gap in the ridge that hid him from the lead of the flock. He heard loud and angry voices rising above the continued bleat of the sheep. He cast a quick glance that way, and at the same time, shifted the rifle that lay across his saddle-fork so that the brown stock was handy for a quick flip to the shoulder.

"Might be a pesky sheriff," thought Red.

It wasn't! For a moment later he saw a tall horseman bending from the back of a rangy gray pony. The rider had fastened the fingers of his right hand in the shirt collar of a spindly-legged lad who stood on the ground alongside the gray horse. And with his left, the man was menacing the boy with an up-raised leather quirt.

The rider's words reached Red; a surly growl. "Throw yore dog into them sheep. Let the leaders move north toward Sourdough Creek!"

The boy lurched away from the man's restraining grip. A brown and white collie dog barked excitedly and strove to aid its young master by nipping the front legs of the gray horse. The pony snorted and began to paw the ground.

"Call off yore dog!" rasped the man with the quirt. "Put him tuh good use. Foller my orders an' start that herd north."

"Pete!" the boy cried, "There's good grass an' water here! If I throw my flock down to the crick, we'll run into plenty trouble with that cow outfit. They've drawed a dead-line there. I've raised these lambs, taken care of 'em. I don't want tuh see 'em killed off jest because you hate that spread on Sourdough Crick."

Pete stuck out his jaw that was covered with a black bristle of week-old whiskers. The popper of his quirt quivered like the tail of a dying snake.

"I'm yore foreman!" he shouted. "I've jest been tuh Painted Rock. The boss says, 'Move north.' I won't put up with no fool kid that's so soft as tuh think kindly of crazy sheep. Nor no yippin' dog. You do what I say or I'll whup yuh into ribbons. An' yore dog to boot."

The boy strained back, defiant but unable to break away from the stronger man. His lips were set in a straight hard line in his lean face. His dog, wildly excited, rushed Pete's horse a second time. The man struck down with his quirt, a slashing blow that blistered the collie across its tender nose. The dog howled, scrambled out of range, and limped to a sagebrush to rub its sore muzzle in the cool dust.

Without a word, the boy sprang toward Pete, seized the man's right leg and attempted to haul him from his saddle. With a sneering laugh, Pete reversed his quirt, and slapped the boy over the head with the shot-loaded handle.

The boy slumped to his knees, still on the fight, but weakened by the treacherous

blow. Not satisfied, Pete leaned far down from his horse, poising his quirt for another slash. . . .

THE short hairs on the sunbaked back of Brazos Red's neck bristled like the hackles of a gray wolf. His frosty blue eyes flashed behind narrowed lids. He flipped up his Winchester intending to put a hot slug through Pete but the man's back was toward him and it was not Red's style to beef a man without giving him a chance to draw.

From his saddle, Red ripped away his rawhide lariat. That was a good line, fashioned and braided south of the Rio Grande, and well stretched on many a stout, longhorned steer. With a flip of his right wrist, Red shook out a scant noose. He chucked up his pony, rode ahead five paces until he was within easy range.

Pete, gloating over the young herder, did not hear the soft thud of pony feet on the grass as the New Mexico rider approached.

"I'll teach yuh a thing or two," Pete remarked. "I'll mark yuh up some. An' then I reckon you'll swing these sheep north—"

But as the quirt whistled down toward the boy's bowed head, something hissed around Pete's long neck. He was jerked backward off his horse, flopped on the ground, and dragged for ten feet through a handy bunch of sagebrush that ripped off his shirt, and then through a bed of prickly pear cactus that wore out the seat of his pants.

After that, seeing that Pete was almost as black in the face as the whiskers on his pointed chin, Brazos Red checked his horse. He slackened his rope, shifted in his saddle so that his rifle covered Pete, and waited for the man to regain his breath.

Pete sat up finally, gasping like a hooked trout. He batted his blood-shot eyes until he caught sight of the calm-faced man, in big hat and leather chaps, on the gaunt, bay pony. Then Pete cursed and reached for the six-gun that should have been hanging from his belt.

"I wouldn't waste time on that," Brazos remarked. "When yuh hit the ground, yore hog-leg jounced outa the holster. Naw—if I was you—I'd expend my strength in pluckin' cactus spikes from my pants. Man—yuh look like an ol' maid's fav-rite pin cushion."

Pete groaned and took Red's advice. He cast the rope off his long, red, turkey-like neck. He began reaping his harvest of prickly pear stickers.

The young herder stood up and staggered toward Red. The boy appeared dazed and uncertain from the blow on his head. His dog whined, and then, after a fearful glance toward the cursing Pete, trailed its young master.

"Thanks, mister," the boy quavered. "I—I coulda stood his jumpin' on me. But when he started whippin' Jasper, it jest seemed that the world turned red. An'—an' I went fer him."

"So the dog's name is Jasper? An' the skunk's name is Pete?"

"That's right, mister. He's Pete Budnack, range foreman of Jake Kells' sheep outfit. These here is some of the sheep. Pete jest rid out from town an' give me orders tuh bust a cattle deadline. An' I kinda hung back."

"I heard yuh, kid. Seems like Pete—if he had any nerve—would bust that line hisself 'stid of rompin' all over a green kid an' a pet dog fer not wantin' tuh rile up a pack of hard an' hairy cowpokes."

"It ain't that I'm feered of cowpokes," said the boy, "but it's because I hired to take good care of these sheep. If I drive 'em over that Sourdough deadline, they'll

jest be butchered. I tried tuh explain that but Pete wouldn't listen."

"I see that," Red interjected.

"He said it was the orders of the boss," the boy went on. "I couldn't hardly believe a good business man like Jake Kells would want his sheep butchered."

Red smiled grimly. "It ain't the fust time I've heard of good business men—cow or sheep—doin' dang fool things, at the expense of pore dumb brutes like longhorns or woolies, to hog a little grass. Naw—it ain't. Time you've lived on the range, lad, long as I have, you may git a different view of things."

"Jest the same," the boy said stubbornly, "I won't move these sheep without orders from Jake Kells."

Pete stood up now on his long, bowed legs. He wore a straggly mustache, black as a buzzard's wing, under his long, inquisitive nose. He turned a pair of beady eyes on the boy and growled. "Yo're fired! Go down to the camp. I'll come along directly an' pay yuh off."

The boy's head drooped. But he took his medicine without any back talk.

"Get up behind," Red said kindly, "I'll give yuh a lift. This hoss is too tired tuh buck. Mebbe—" he glanced after Pete who was hobbling off in search of his horse, "mebbe Pete will change his mind."

DOWN in the wagon, a comfortable vehicle fitted to serve as a movable home for herders, Red sat across the table from the lad and watched the latter take a smoking roast of mutton from the oven.

"Kid," he remarked as he picked up his knife and fork, "you have more than paid me back fer my ropin' act."

The boy grinned. And Red saw that he was a likely-looking youth, and wondered why he had turned sheepherder. But it is not the western code to ask damn fool questions. So Red merely looked over the youthful, freckled face opposite him, the clear gray eyes, and the clean lines of wide mouth and good chin. And thought again of the lad's valiant defense of a pet dog.

"That boy," he thought, "stacks up."

The boy sliced off a round of the roast, served Red with good black coffee, placed sourdough bread, and even butter, in front of the half-starved rider.

"My—my name's Jerry Malone," he offered shyly. "I—I ain't been long in Wyomin'. Washed dishes fer a chink in Cheyenne. Then come north an' worked around a livery stable. Bein' green, I couldn't git out on the range until this chance come up tuh herd sheep."

"What yould yuh *like* to do, Jerry?" Red asked.

The gray eyes glistened. "Punch cows," whispered the boy. He gave Brazos Red a hopeful look, sized up the New Mexican's cowpoke attire, the sunbaked, snub-nosed face, the sharp blue eyes that could flash with wrath one moment then shine with honest mirth. "You look like a puncher," said Jerry. "Mebbe you—you could tip me off. I—I'm set to go since Pete tied a can on me."

The grin faded from Red's face. His heart felt heavy. So great was his sorrow that for the moment he forgot his hunger. Which was going some for a man who had dined on jack-rabbit, hours and hours before.

"I wisht I could, Jerry," Red said. "I shore wisht I could. But I—I am sorta passin'—" he coughed and sought for words, picturing the reward notice that dogged his trail, and the hawk-eyed sheriffs and posses who barred his northward flight. "I'm sorta passin' through Wyomin'," he went on. "Don't know many outfits up here. But I'll keep yuh in mind, boy. I'll shore keep yuh in mind."

"I had an uncle onct that come west

like me," said Jerry. "He went into the cattle business. I heard about him from my mother. So when—when she—"

Red blinked. "Yeah," he cut in hastily, "when the home was gone you come west like many another young sprout. An' take it from me, Jerry, if yuh stand up straight through like yuh did fer yore dog, you'll make the top grade in Wyomin' Don't worry, kid. I—I sorta know what yo're up against."

For Red, as a hotheaded young sprout, had drifted away from a little ranch down on the Rio Grande in Texas after there was nobody left to care much where he went. And he had played the game and ridden straight until there arose this range war in New Mexico that had made him a hunted outlaw. It didn't mention on the reward notice that he had killed his man in self defense, and after his opponent had drawn his iron. But the victim's employers had held the upper hand in politics. So Red had become a fugitive, with blood money on his red head, and a hangman's noose waiting for him down in the Brazos Country. . . .

"I—I'll go out now an' feed yore pony," the boy mumbled. And he kept his eyes lowered so that Red couldn't see they had become strangely blurred. For this dusty, red-haired rider had given the first kindly word to young Jerry. And fired anew the boy's resolve to make good, no matter how stiff the going.

JERRY stepped out of the wagon. Red, doffing his hat the better to get at his victuals, went thankfully to work over his loaded plate He had just set his teeth in a juicy portion of mutton when he heard a step in the doorway. Thinking it was Jerry returning, he didn't look up.

"Dinner shore tastes fine, kid," he said.

A sharp blow jolted him on the side of his head. Red glimpsed the flash of descending steel from the corner of one eye, just rolled his head in time to escape the full force of the blow. Otherwise it would have brained him. As it was, his face was rammed down flat and smothered in the plate full of gravy, meat, and potatoes.

A man leaped on his bent back and bestrode him like a rider atop a broncho. Dimly he heard the high-pitched war whoop of Pete Budnack.

"You dang wolf-jawed outlaw! I'll shore take yuh to town! An' collect that reward!"

"I'm danged!" groaned Red, half choking on too much grub. "It's shore hell tuh be famous."

Then, dizzy as a bat in daylight, but certain he must fight for his life, Red reached back with both hands and grabbed Pete's legs that were clamped against his short ribs.

Pete struck a second time with the wagon wrench he had plucked from the double-trees as he entered the sheep-wagon. But Red reared up and back, firmly gripping Pete's writhing legs, and crushed the man between his own stout body and the canvas-covered bows of the wagon.

The table collapsed in a clatter of tinware. The stove went next. The wagon caught fire. Red and Pete, grunting and gasping, fought it out on the floor in a muddle of ashes and gravy.

The smoke thickened until both men were gasping. Flames ran up the wagon bows. Brazos Red fought on grimly. But Pete's nerve broke as he felt the heat and tasted the smoke.

"Fire!" he gasped. "Let me go! We'll roast!"

Red felt the man's fighting strength fail as panic gripped him. Now was the time. Red mustered his power, staggered up, and flung Pete through the door.

He followed, saw Pete lying senseless at the end of the wagon tongue. The

vehicle where Red had dined—or attempted to dine—was now a blazing bonfire. There was just time to free his plunging horse and get the pony out of danger.

"I'll shore drift pronto," Red snarled. "That smoke will draw every man in twenty miles."

For the black column stood up like a Sioux war signal. Then—as Red boarded his pony on the run—the thought flashed into his mind: "What of the boy? Of Young Jerry?"

He swung his pony, threw in the spurs, circled the wagon so closely that heat seared his face. He spotted long and helpless legs sprawling from under the wagon. He heard what sounded like a muffled whining above the hiss and crackle of flames.

He slid off, made a quick rush through smoke that blinded him, fire that struck at his face and hands like a naked sword. He found Jerry there, dragged the youngster out in the brush. The boy was whispering hoarsely.

"Jasper!" He tried to rise but couldn't. "My—my dog. Under the wagon."

Red pushed the lad down hurriedly but with a gentle touch. "Lay quiet," he said sharply. *"I'll* git the bow-wow."

That was more difficult. Little of Red's shirt remained when he came out of fire and smoke with the wriggling dog in his arms. Jasper's head and half his body had been stuffed into a seamless sack, and his hind legs tied to his front quarters.

As he laid the dog down beside Jerry, the wagon collapsed into a blazing ruin. And at that moment, Pete Budnack, reposing until now on the back of his neck, sat up and located the six-gun slung from his belt. He took a snapshot at Brazos Red and cut a silver concha off the New Mexican's chaps.

"That hombre," Red grunted, "is a fiend fer punishment."

Rising, he drew and shot the gun out of Pete's hand, then loped across the intervening space, and finished what he had started before the sheep-wagon caught fire.

CHAPTER TWO

Outlaw Hoss

RED stood over young Jerry who was rolled up in the New Mexican's single blanket. Since the burning of the wagon, Red had cared for the dazed and blistered boy and the youngster's dog. He had placed Jerry in the saddle, walked and led the gaunt pony, pushed north into the timbered hills for cover. The night had passed. And now—with the sun high above the eastern divide—Red was again hitting the lonely trail.

"The kid," he thought, staring down at the boy's closed eyes and parted lips, "wants tuh be a cowpoke. An' he picked out me—me a hombre what's wanted fer fust degree murder—he had tuh pick *me* as his pitcher of a top hand."

Heavy was the lanky outlaw's heart. For nothing would have pleased him better than to ride for the same brand as Jerry and watch the stout-hearted youngster develop into a real broncho twister and trail hand. Again Red thought of that day down in New Mexico when his swift bullet beat the other man's, and crooked politics started him riding the long trail.

And next time, he vowed, that he started out to kill a man, he'd ascertain his political party first. It certainly made plenty difference. If he'd beefed a gent who wasn't voting right, mebbe they'd have made him a special deputy sheriff instead of putting the Injun sign on him, and stretching a half inch rope for his neck.

Vain regrets. He had killed his man. The luck had run against him. A hundred John Laws were on his trail, spurred on by the promise of big money. Supposing this boy discovered that his hero was a hunted outlaw? Worth blood money? Would he turn? Red didn't quite believe that for young Jerry had measured up to a man's size.

Nope! Red was deeply reflective, the kid wouldn't turn him in. But it wasn't right for him to keep Jerry along. They might throw him in the jug for aiding and abetting. No—Red had got to quit. But he couldn't throw the youngster loose on the range.

For after all, the boy had lost his job —and Pete, after the fight with Red, had been in no shape to pay him off.

THIS little ridge, covered with quaking asp patches, Red believed, loomed above Sourdough Creek. In the valley was located the cattle outfit against whose line Pete had ordered Jerry to move his herd.

He decided to leave a little note for the boy, before riding on. So he scribbled a few words on a bit of paper torn from his tally book.

"So long, Jerry. When you wake up, go down to the crick. I figure they'll be glad to give a good, strong boy work for his keep. If you keep yore chin up, I know that any self respectin' cow spread will be glad tuh keep you on.

So long."

He longed to sign his name but thought it better that the boy shouldn't be tipped off that his red-haired friend was an outlaw, and reputed to be a pal of Billy the Kid. So Red, after writing the note, laid it alongside the boy's head, and weighted it down with two twenty dollar gold pieces, all the money he had.

The dog, Jasper, tied to a tree not far from where his young master slept, roused up and wagged a tail that had once been plumy but now looked rather bedraggled, having been scorched in the fire. Red paused and patted the head, looked deeply into Jasper's golden brown eyes.

"Keep cases on the boy," he said.

Then he mounted and steered his pony over the ridge. Where cattle ran, there should also be well-broken horses. And he needed another mount badly—for his own pony was weary and gaunt from long trails and scant grass.

Another thing that Red knew well was that horse stealing was as serious as murder in this country. But when a man is hungry, and the whole country seems against him, and his luck has apparently run out—and also his pony—then a naturally sunny disposition is apt to become clouded. And morals impaired.

They'd hang him anyway if they ever got him back to New Mexico. So why worry about making that long trip back from Wyoming? If he was to hang, he'd hang up here and have the job over. . . .

His limping pony reached the lower fringe of the quaker patch where the eternally shivering leaves cast dappled shadows on the damp ground. There, by habit, Red reined in and cautiously looked over the creek valley. A fellow could never tell what rock might hide a sheriff.

Then a grin softened his dusty, weather-beaten face, and a sparkle came back into his frosty blue eyes. A hundred yards below the thicket, he spotted a high-pole corral built against a ledge of red sandstone. Dust hovered above the enclosure. Red could hear the beat of hoofs as a horse ran in circles to dodge a rope. Also he heard the roper pausing occasionally to cuss out the darting, swerving pony.

"That gent," Red thought, "seems tuh be havin' trouble catchin' up that hayburner. I'll go down an' relieve him of his troubles a hull lot."

Before he quit the quakers, he jerked his carbine from its rawhide scabbard, and pumped a shell into the chamber. He pulled his hat down as far as it would go without disturbing the shirt tail bandage above his ears—the first aid administered where Pete had hit him with the wagon wrench.

Red eased down to the corral. He knew that the roper would be hot and weary from bothersome attempts to rope the bronc; that he would likely not notice the approach of a strange horseman.

He'd been up against smart horses himself in a corral. And sometimes it seemed as if he had to throw his rope half a day before catching them, and that all he could see was blue on account of the language that is part of a horse-roper's trade.

He half circled the corral, wary as a coyote approaching a dead horse, for ever on his mind was the thought of sheriffs and Pete Budnack who doubtless by this time was running all over three counties hollering fire. When he finally rode up to the poles, he laid his rifle barrel on the top rail, cocked the weapon, and covered the man in the corral.

BUT the stranger's back was toward him. He saw that in the interval of his approach, the man had roped the horse, hung a coat over its eyes as a blindfold, and cinched a saddle on the humped and quivering back.

As Red prepared to drawl "Hands up," the stranger took up rein slack, put his left boot in the stirrup, and swung off the ground.

He was a little stiff in action, Red observed, who had ridden everything in the way of horse-flesh from a Shetland pony to a Kentucky thorough-bred. But he was ready to bet that bronc could buck when he got warmed up to it.

The rider—a stocky specimen in huge batwing leather chaps, with a faded slouch hat pulled far down on his head—settled himself cautiously in the saddle, then reached down to whip the coat off the pony's head.

"A mistake thar'," thought Red, for the rider was loose in the saddle. The best way to make a lone ride on a bronc, as Red well knew, was to throw him and hogtie him before saddling. Then get aboard while the horse is down, reach down and slip off the half hitches of the hogging string, give the bronc the spur in the guts, and let it get up with the rider set for action.

As Red expected, this stocky rider was caught off guard when he flipped the blind off the bronc's roman nose. The pony blinked once, then bawled, and bogged his ugly head. At his first jump, the rider lost a stirrup. The second threw him over the saddle-horn. The third stretched him out in the dust. As he hit and bounced, the slouch hat came off. Red's amazed stare took in the sight of long braids of gray hair there in the corral dust.

"A woman," snapped the New Mexican. "An' old, by gosh!"

A woman of grandmother degree attempting to gentle and bust out a range bronc! All alone up here in these hills! Well, Red had moved considerable, and covered lots of territory since the days when he was a bare-footed kid in Texas, but he had never forgotten a certain gray-haired woman down on the Rio Grande who never quit a man, even when the whole world seemed against him.

The raging bronc, whirling around on writhing hindquarters, on the space of a thin dime, sighted the old woman sprawled out in the dust. With a high squeal of rage, it dashed forward, with slashing front feet, to make its kill.

BRAZOS raised in his saddle, seized the top rail with both hands, vaulted

over. He lit on all fours in the dust. By that act, he had lost his own horse, saddle, and rifle. For his tired pony, stirred to panic by the sight of the red-eyed killer in the corral, had turned and stampeded down Sourdough Creek. And in turning, it had stepped on Red's carbine which he had dropped to the ground in his hurry to jump into the corral.

A fast man with a six-gun, Red hadn't time to draw iron and put a bullet between the bronc's wall eyes. There was just one thing to do. Interpose his own brawny form between the charging horse and the body of the unconscious woman.

He did it.

But it wasn't a blind and headlong sacrifice of life or limb. Here was a man who had been brought up in the school of broncs, a tough school, if ever there was one. He had graduated with honors—and several scars and the loss of a couple of front teeth.

He reached up, as he dived into the dust, and grabbed the bridle bit. For the old woman had made her ride with regulation bridle rather than a hackamore. Which, of course, indicated that the horse was broken to steel, and therefore more of an outlaw than a nervous broncho.

Red's big hand clamped down on the bit, and he hung and rattled. He let his boots come off the ground. His body swayed to each lunge of the horse. His whole weight of one hundred seventy pounds—as described in the reward notice—dragged on the horse's tender mouth like an anchor. The pony bawled and struck out. But being close to the shoulder of the horse, Red couldn't get the full and killing effect of hoofs that were hard as iron from running on baked badland gumbo. That was another bit of hard-earned wisdom. Red knew, that to feel the full benefit of a kick by horse or mule, the recipient must receive it at the extreme limit of the beast's reach.

The kicks were blocked but side-swipes wrecked what remained of Red's shirt and overalls. He didn't mind that so long as he could fight it out with the outlaw, and prevent the animal from stamping out the life of the old woman.

Now the gray-haired woman sat up groggilly, and blinked her eyes. Then she pawed around in the dust until she found a couple of hair pins. After she had re-balanced her hair, she fumbled again but desisted with a hearty curse.

"Dad blame it!" she barked, "that fool bronc threw me so hard he busted my spec's." And she flung away the twisted steel frame of a pair of eye-glasses.

Then, for the first time, she became aware of the man who was fighting the horse. Until then her head had been reeling and because of her poor vision, she had been but dimly aware of the squalling, bawling struggle between the red head and the horse.

"That fool horse!" she spat out. She scrambled up, and staggered around until she could steady her wobbling knees. "Still aimin' tuh brain somebody! I'll work the cuss over!"

There wasn't anything in sight but rails of the corral. She tore one off and waded in. Her first vigorous blow spatted the bronc on his tender nose, set him back on his hind legs. This gave Red an opportunity to grab for the pony's ear. He seized and twisted.

"Git the coat!" he yelped.

The woman understood. Once the sunlight was shut off, the bronc would stand quietly. She dropped her medicine pole, and rushed the coat to Red. He slapped it over the bronc's eyes, let the panting animal stand up. Then he lurched over and flopped down on his back.

STORM-EYED with rage, the old woman knelt above him. "Hand me yore gun," she urged. "I'll kill that brute

for what he did to you. Likely he's kicked yore innards plumb outa kilter. Yuh pore boy!"

Red grinned feebly through his mask of corral grime. "It ain't a kick of the hoss that's worryin' my innards," he gasped. "It's lack of grub."

"Lack of grub?"

"Yeah. I—I been kinda in a hurry lately an' had no time to eat. Last time I tasted chuck was yesterday mornin'. An' then it wasn't nuthin' but a chunk of fried jack-rabbit."

"Fried jack-rabbit? What are you anyway? Yuh wear the riggin' of a puncher. But dang few punchers I ever see that go so long without grub. And dang few, that bein' weak from lack of grazin', would dive into the front feet of a killer bronc." She was seated now. She had Red's head pillowed against her broad-beamed bosom. He felt sheepish about that but, after all, she looked old enough to be his mother, and so long as none of the boys were around to see a New Mexican killer thus comforted by a gray-haired old lady who could swear like a pirate, why it was pretty nice after all.

So Red began to drift off into a little dream in which he was battling a buckskin bronc to prevent it planting both hind feet in a frying pan filled with ham and eggs.

The old woman spoke. "If you hadn't come along, I reckon that hoss woulda tromped all over my fool carcass. I'd orter knowed better at my age than tuh take a chance on a mean outlaw. But then I needed a mount bad. Turrible bad!"

"What fur, mom?" Red asked drowsily.

"I need a hoss," she said, "to go for Slim Jim."

"Slim Jim? Who's he?"

"He's the sheriff of Painted Rock County."

That brought Red out of his delirium. He sat up straight as a picket pin prairie-dog.

"*Sheriff?*" he blurted. "Why do *you* need a sheriff?"

"This range," she snapped, "has got plumb full of outlaws. I'd ride a Kansas cyclone to git the sheriff an' see 'em all cleaned up."

Red saw that here was a showdown. Evidently that sheep-foreman had spread the word. This old woman, alarmed that a New Mexico killer was abroad, had taken chances on an outlaw horse to summon the law. Within a few moments, after she had seen his red hair and the dimple in his cheek made by a forty-five bullet, she would recognize him as Brazos Red.

"I could fight it out with a sheriff or a sheep-herder," Red thought. "But what kin I do agin' a woman?"

CHAPTER THREE

Red Draws One

THE kindly old lady pointed to the shady side of the corral. "Lay over there," she suggested, "while I go to the crick for a hat full of water. I'll give you a drink an' let yuh wash off yore face. It's covered with corral dust."

Alarm stirred Red to life. He sat up, protesting that his weakness had vanished. For he believed, if she did wash his face, that she woud identify him as the hunted outlaw. He wouldn't chance being trapped here on Sourdough Creek in his weakened condition. He had performed his good turn for the day. With a little rest, he might be able to stay in the saddle on the buckskin outlaw. Then it would be good-bye to Sourdough Creek, and all sheriffs named Slim Jim.

It wasn't as easy as that. The old lady sat down in front of Red. Dubiously she sized him up with her faded blue

eyes. There was a shamed look on her chubby, deeply tanned face.

"I expect," she said, "that yo're wonderin' why I don't ask a starvin' rider who's jest saved my fool life to step down to my hangout fer a squar' meal. Wa'al—" her voice became harsh, and her eyes flashed—"if I hadn't been held up bright an' early today by a tarnation pack of outlaws, you'd shore have yore choice of the grub list, kid. But them da—dang outlaws—"

Red frowned. "You mean there's more than one botherin' you?"

"One?" She stuck out her chin. "There's at least three. An' more comin'. Listen: My name is Missus Bettiker. Most folks of Painted Rock county call me Maw. I've lived in these parts fer forty years. My ol' man—afore he cashed—he run five thousand head of cattle on this crick. But times got bad. Steers starved in hard winters, died from seven year itch an' the like in the summer. Markets went down. Finally, six months back, my ol' man he cashed too. Left me with this Rockin' Chair Bar outfit on my hands. An' a wad of debts. I figured I'd save what I could an' git off the range. Only had a couple cowpokes left tuh help me. So we put five hundred longhorns in the pasture tuh make the big fat. If they ain't bothered, an' have plenty grass fer six more weeks, I'll make the riffle. But if they lose that pasture—then it's me for the old folks' home."

Red nodded sorrowfully. She wasn't the first old timer he had seen in the west, beaten and bowed by the hard life but never giving up hope. But most of them had been men folks. He said as much.

"Say," Maw said sharply, "I'm as good as any man that ever lived. If they give me a man's chance. But they laugh at me on this range cause I'm a woman. It's apt tuh ruin me."

Then she told him that because she was a woman, old and apparently weak, Jake Kells, the rich stockman and range hog, had attempted to buy her fenced land at a poor-house price. When she refused, he bought several herds of sheep and announced his intention of breaking her deadline on Sourdough Creek and ruining the pasturage where she was fattening cattle for the fall market.

Red stood up, angry through and through. "What sort of folks live up here," he rasped, "that would let a hog like Kells do this?"

"Money talks," said Maw. "An' besides Jake claims a sorta legal right. There's a trail crosses the crick which I don't control. He swears I can't stop his sheep from travellin' it. An' *legally* I can't. But soon as his herds are across, they'll scatter out, crawl under my bob wire fences, an' clean off all my pasture grass."

"An' then?"

She bowed her head. "Then," she said with a weary shake of her head, "all I can do is to sell to Kells at his own price. Which will mean for me—goin' on the county for support. Me that come here forty years ago with my ol' man an' helped to take this damn country away from the Injuns."

She stood up, and walked away from Red to hide her sorrowful face. He stood there, bristly chin lowered, thumbs jabbed down inside his sagging cartridge belt. This was another side of the picture. Yesterday young Jerry had protested against the breaking of a cattle deadline with poor dumb brutes he had cared for. And Maw Bettiker faced ruin today because a range hog threatened to steal her precious grass.

"Dang it," Red thought, "I orter ride on. Mind my own business. An' keep from bein' hung. But what's a man tuh do?"

HE strode over to where Maw stood, and gently laid his big right hand on her shaking shoulder. "Name the play, ma'am," he drawled softly. "I'll stay to the limit."

Turning, she faced him. And watching the hopeful look grow in her tired eyes, he thought again of another gray-haired woman who had once loved him down on the Rio Grande.

"I got no right to drag a stranger into this!" cried Maw. "You have done enough today. Saved my life."

He smiled and shook his head. "Call the play," he insisted. "I'll see you through."

"All right," she told him. "It's a go. You won't suffer none if we win. Listen—" she bent forward, and glanced around her before she went on—"Kells and three of his men rode up to my ranch at daybreak. The buildings are jest a quarter mile down the crick. They corralled my two punchers an' made me cook breakfast. They said they figured to keep us under guard until the sheep started crossin'. Seemed like there had been some delay. Jake was cussin' his foreman."

Red grinned, knowing just what had caused that delay.

"That hoss," she explained, pointing to the buckskin, "is jest sorta locoed. About one good buck in him per day. He's had it. That's what I come up here for. I sneaked outa the house through a cellar door that Jake didn't know about. We had tied this hoss in here yesterday figuring that standin' all night at a post would gentle him."

"Well," he prompted.

"You climb him," she said. "An' ride to Painted Rock. Hunt up Slim Jim, the sheriff. An' bring him out here. He'll make Jake Kells hunt his hole dang quick."

Brazos Red stepped back a pace. The grin froze on his dusty face. He had given his promise to back Maw Bettiker to the limit. And now she had asked him, a hunted outlaw, to ride to town and call on a sheriff.

"Of all the dang fool luck," groaned Red.

"What's that?" she asked, for her hearing wasn't so good.

He looked from her to the buckskin broncho. And he made up his mind. He *would* stay to the limit. They might throw him in jail, collect the blood money, send him south to a gallows. But this sheriff, who appeared from Maw's talk to be her friend, would ride out to spike Jake Kells' dirty game.

"I'm on my way," said Brazos Red.

He stooped to adjust his spurs. For he believed that if he topped off the buckskin, it would only be by riding on his hooks or anchoring his rowels in the hair cinch. The pony stood, slouch-headed, and apparently asleep under the warm sun. But Red had seen sleepy bronchos before. They didn't deceive him none.

"Yo're a good boy," Maw said softly. "I—I wisht I had a boy to sorta look after things."

She was smiling up at him when, from outside the corral, sounded a harsh command.

"Put up yore hands!"

Down on his haunches, his right hand busy with a spur strap, Red did not raise his eyes for a long moment. A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind. Had the sheriff arrived? Or a posse? Could he reach back and jerk his six-gun? Was there a fighting chance left to escape?

Apparently not for the bold voice insisted. "You hear me? Git off yore hams an' reach fer Heaven!"

WHEN a man talked like that, it was from behind a cocked and ready six-gun. Brazos Red put up his hands. He

stood up slowly, turned on his high boot heels, and faced the man who held high cards. Maw, standing a few paces to his left, spat out angrily. "Jake Kells? How did *you* git here?"

Red saw a paunchy man, with dusty hat cocked on one side of his bullet head, standing just outside the corral gate. He held a long six-gun that circled between Red and Maw Bettiker. Jake's tiny, piggish eyes, round and hard-looking as marbles, twinkled as he answered Maw's question.

"I heard you stop cussin' in the kitchen," he explained. "So I jest took a sa'nter around the house, cut yore trail, an' follered yuh up the crick. Got here in time tuh listen in while you coaxed this red-complected pilgrim tuh hustle to Painted Rock fer the sheriff. Wa'al, Missus Bettiker, I regret to state that he won't hustle none." Jake's voice hardened and he gestured with his six-gun. "Come outa that corral. An' keep yore hands up. Both of yuh."

With his left hand, he slightly opened the gate. The two filed through, Maw in the lead, and fiercely denouncing Jake. He grinned evilly under the brushy mustache of coarse sandy hair that shaded his trap mouth.

"Go ahead an' cuss," he suggested. "Before the sheriff ever gits here, my sheep will bust yore deadline, an' feed off yore pasture, slick as a whistle."

"Kells, you hog! You'd go any route for a dirty dollar," she rasped.

"This is plain business," he snarled. "I offered tuh buy yuh out. I'm a big operator. Both sheep an' cattle. I need range. But you—bein' a fool woman—you wouldn't talk business. You turned me down."

"Because I was a woman, you wouldn't make me a decent price."

For the moment, the range hog's whole attention was on Maw. Red edged around the corral. There was hope in his eye. For he had spotted his rifle on the ground where he had dropped it as he swung off his horse. Kells would see any sudden sneak of right hand toward six-gun holster. But a man might take a chance, drop flat on the ground, seize the rifle, and plug Jake in his fat leg.

He eased along until he was not a stride from the rifle. His heart pounded against his short ribs, for within a few flashing seconds, he would dare a six-gun bullet at close range. He stood there, apparently relaxed, and with hands up. But his muscles were tense, his nerves at full strain.

"Now dang yuh, Jake Kells," Maw began. "If Slim Jim hears about yore raid, he'll run yuh plumb tuh Canada tuh kill yuh."

Jake grinned. "Jim's a sheriff. He knows that trail is open across Sourdough Crick. You got no legal right to close it. Jim would have tuh resign to kill me. An' Jim can't afford to do that."

"You figure you hold high cards. But, Kells, although yuh got an ace in the hole right now, a full stud hand ain't been dealt. We're still drawin' cards—"

BRAZOS RED dived suddenly for his rifle, flattened out on the ground, smacked the stock against his shoulder.

"I draw one!" he ripped out.

Jake Kells, swinging stiffly, with gun chopping down for a quick shot, looked into the Winchester's ominous barrel. He saw the frosty glint of Red's blue eyes back of the rear sight.

Maw flattened against the corral poles. She blinked her eyes, drew up her shoulders, waiting for the double roll of guns.

It didn't come. Jake Kells stood there, braced on his thick legs. He was staring down at the red-headed man who lay on the ground with rifle butt tucked between chin and shoulder. And Jake, who had

until now led the game with an ace in the hole, considered whether he should draw another card.

Brazos Red grinned thinly. "Make yore play," he said softly. "Or lay down yore gun!"

Jake Kells never knew, from Red's cool voice, that the outlaw had discovered that his rifle was useless. His pony, in stampeding away from the corral, had broken off the hammer. Red was betting his life that a man of Kells' type, a persecutor of women, would show yellow when called.

And Red was right. Slowly, Jake Kells opened his right hand. He dropped his six-gun. Maw picked it up promptly. Then—and only then—Red stood up. Nor did he reveal that he had bluffed with a broken gun. It doesn't pay in poker—or in life—to reveal such tactics.

"I can handle him now," Red told Maw. "I'll use my own hog-leg."

He set his rifle against the fence, drew his six-gun. "We will now adjourn to Maw's ranch," he told Kells. "An' thar' we'll round up yore plug uglies a hull lot."

Kells considered Red. The New Mexican looked poverty-stricken, out of luck. He was a stranger to this range. Kells firmly believed that money would always talk.

"Listen, young feller," he coaxed. "I stand high in these parts. This ol' woman is plumb busted an' don't know it. Jest a stubborn ol' hen that's interferin' with real men."

"Real men?" snapped Maw. And stepped forward to slap Jake across the chops. But she held her hand for he stood under Red's gun, and it was not Maw's code to take unfair advantage.

Kells squirmed away from her. He continued his argument with the calm-faced New Mexican.

"Listen," he said, "you an' me can talk turkey. Throw in with my outfit. Help me tuh move my sheep across the Rockin' Chair Bar deadline. An' it'll be wuth—"

Red grinned. "How much?" he asked.

"A hundred dollars," said Jake, batting his little round eyes.

Red stepped closer, still smiling. But there wasn't any humor in his narrowed eyes. "Jake," he said, "you jest showed coyote blood. An' now yuh also prove yo're a piker. A hundred hollars to hire a gunfighter? What's Wyomin' comin' to?"

Jake squirmed under Red's boring gaze. "Aw," he stammered, "I was jest joshin'. I'll make it five hundred."

"Listen," Red said craftily, "we'll go down to the house an' put it in writin'."

"What?"

"Our deal. Showin' you paid me five hundred bucks tuh run sheep over this old woman's land."

"I don't like writin'. My word's good."

For Jake was a fox and knew that such a document would be evidence against him if Maw sued him in court for ruining her property.

"Hell," Red said jocularly. "You'll never see me again after today. It's jest a receipt. Git on that hoss. We'll go down now an' sign the papers."

STEPPING back, he lowered his gun point, and allowed Jake to rest his weary arms. The range hog shook his head in puzzled fashion. Then he cheered up. If he got Red down to the house where his three followers waited, they would make short work of this pilgrim and Maw Bettiker. It might be better to humor the two fools in the meantime.

"All right," he said grandly.

He advanced into the corral. The buckskin stood there, one hip propped up, and apparently sleeping like any well-behaved cayuse.

"Git right on," Red told him. "That's

my hoss. But I'm shore proud tuh let a rich feller like you try him out. Yuh might give me a hundred dollars fer that nag. Git right on, Mister Kells."

Kells puffed out his mustache, tightened the belt around his paunch, reached for reins and stirrup.

"How about this coat over his head?" he asked suspiciously. For a blind indicated a raw broncho.

"I was jest breakin' him tuh carry double," explained Red. "Might need tuh pack a man back of the saddle some day. I'll take off the blind, Mister Kells, when yo're sot in the leather."

He talked so smoothly that Kells' suspiction was killed. The fat man rose up grandly, settled down in the saddle. Red stood at the buckskin's head, ready to pull off the blind. Maw had also come inside the corral and closed the gate.

"Ready?" asked Red.

"You bet," said Jake. "Let's go!"

"Go then," drawled Red, and jerked off the blind.

"Open the gate," Kells called out pompously. And he jabbed both spurs into the buckskin's ribs.

The buckskin felt the steel, took one backward glance at Jake's thick legs, then bogged its snaky head. It pitched straight across the corral.

"Hey!" Jake yelled as he was thrown up on the saddle horn.

"Hey, yoreself!" whooped Red, and scudded over to the gate where he could protect Maw if the horse came near.

But she was gasping with laughter. For now Jake had landed back of the saddle. And immediately he arose again in the thin air.

Out of the fog of dust and booming hoofs that was Jake and the bawling buckskin, the sheepman now emerged. The pony threw him the full length of the bridle reins, then checked, and stood snorting and blowing through its quivering nostrils. Jake lay on the flat of his back, paunch rising and falling quickly as he labored for wind.

Both Red and Maw were watching, doubled with laughter, and waiting for Jake to arise.

"Git on an' ride," Red suggested.

Something round and cold poked Red between his shoulder blades. A cold voice rasped. "You damn outlaw! Stick up yore hands! Ridin's over for today."

Red choked on his laughter. His flesh turned cold as though he had stepped naked into a blizzard wind. He knew that voice. He had heard it berating a kid sheep-herder the day before. Pete Budnack, the foreman, had finally cornered him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brazos Red Is Called

JAKE KELLS, groggy on his feet, faced Red. He blinked his eyes to clear them, and slowly drew the popper of his quirt between his fingers.

"Pete," he said hoarsely. "Hold him tight with yore gun! I'll show him what happens to a boxhead joker that puts an innercent gent on a damned outlaw hoss!"

He advanced on Red, quirt thrown back over his shoulder. "I'll make yuh grin," he snarled. "I'll show yuh. I'll whip that smirk of yore chops."

But Maw stepped between the two before the lash fell. "You got tuh whip me first," she said boldly. "An' if you do, Kells, it means you'll be lynched or run outa Wyomin'."

Kells knew that. Half stupified with rage, he held his quirt. For after all, Kells was playing for bigger stakes than revenge on a fool cowpoke.

"Pete," he ordered harshly, "make him step outa the corral. An' watch him. He's still holdin' his six-gun."

"Drop it," Pete said promptly, and ground his gun muzzle an inch deeper into Red's back.

Red sighed and obeyed. He was disarmed. His six-gun lay in the dirt. His rifle was broken. But while a man lived, there was always hope. And, at least, Red reflected, he hadn't been pinched by a sheriff.

They filed out of the corral, Maw leading, Red next, and Jake bringing up the rear. Pete Budnack, proud because he had slipped up and shoved the long barrel of an old buffalo rifle through the poles, greeted Red with a contemptuous grin.

"I figured," he declared, "that you'd be harder tuh take. You—a friend of Billy the Kid."

Jake Kells asked sharply. "What yuh talkin' about, Pete?"

Pete gestured. "This—" he began. "While I was in Painted Rock, I read that notice in the weekly paper. I cut it out an' stuck it in my pocket."

Jake Kells surveyed Red. His little eyes glistened. "By Gosh!" he declared. "I remember it too. I thought from the start this hombre looked familiar." He stepped nearer, deliberately jabbed a trigger finger into the tiny dimple that had been made by a bullet on Red's right check.

Red had been waiting for that. For the instant, Jake's thick body covered him from Pete's gun, he flung both arms around the fat man, jerked him off his feet, and flung him straight toward Pete. The range foreman, attempting to sidestep for a quick shot, lost balance, fell flat on his back. Jake Kells crashed down on his wriggling body. Red followed with Jake as his mattress.

Red's hope was to get a gun. With a Colt, or Pete's buffalo, he could control the play. As he straddled Jake Kells' heaving chest, he knew that he hadn't the physical strength to defeat both these men. Lack of food had sapped Red's strength. The fierce give and take of the past few moments had weakened him more. . . .

UNDERNEATH, Jake Kells began to squirm and pitch like a bucking broncho. Poor Pete, buried under the weight of two men, was out for the moment. But Jake Kells wasn't. He outweighted Brazos by at least fifty pounds.

He put every pound of his beef into resistence against Red's desperate efforts to get a gun. Glaring up at the New Mexican, whose face wasn't a foot above his own, Jake flung up his thick arms in a try for a hold around Red's neck.

This bucking and bouncing wasn't helping Pete Budnack. He lay limp as a rag doll beneath the two furious fighters who had jumped on him.

There, in the shadow of the pole corral, the dust puffed up like smoke while the two battlers—Red and Jake—fought their finish fight. For the fear of death had put the courage of a cornered rat into Kells' fat, degenerate heart. He knew this red-headed rider now as a noted southwestern killer. He believed that unless he cracked Red's neck or choked him down, he would surely die here on Sourdough Creek.

His crooked arm tightened slowly, relentlessly, around Red's neck. The rock-like biceps were digging into Red's throat. The pilgrim's wind was cut off. He choked and fought for breath. But inch by inch, Jake drew Red's head down toward his broad chest. Once there, he could twist and strain until he had forced Red's surrender.

Red sat astride the big man, and because of Jake's might, he was forced to use both hands to control the sheep king's right arm. This presented a problem. If he released his grip to wrench away Jake's strangle hold, then the big man would

surely bring his right mitt into action.

Maw Bettiker, half out of her wits, hampered by poor eye-sight, shuffled around the edges of the fight, peering through the dust, seeking vainly to aid Red.

Shafts of red and yellow light were shooting up before Red's glazing eyes. Now Jake had him almost choked down. He was like a spring calf caught by a rawhide lariat around its neck. He saw the huge, ungainly form of Maw Bettiker through the haze, had barely enough wind to gasp hoarsely: "Hand me a gun!"

Above the bellowing of Jake, the hoarse, painful breathing of Red, she heard that entreaty.

So rapid had been events that Maw did not know the location of the various weapons that had been used and discarded as the play went from one opponent to the other. All she saw was the rifle that Red had set up against the corral. Nor did Maw know that it was useless for Red hadn't revealed that, fearing revelation of his ability to bluff would be good news to Jake Kells.

Maw seized the Winchester by the barrel, intending to poke the stock toward Red. But as she loped in, she saw that Red was fighting with both arms to maintain his desperate grip on Jake's right. Then Jake Kells, believing that victory was near, rolled his bullet head, and turned his tiny, bloodshot eyes toward Maw.

With a scream, Maw whirled up the rifle, smashed it down like a war club.

HE saw the blow descending, the flash of sun on polished wood, burnished steel. He ground out a curse, tried to turn his head aside from the blow.

If Maw's batting eye had been in better shape, it is likely she would have cracked Jake's thick skull like an egg. As it was, the gunstock clipped him just above the right ear. He went limp. His eyes rolled up until the whites showed. His left arm unhooked from under Red's suffering chin, and the New Mexican, feeling life leave the bull-like body, rolled off, and lay on the ground, utterly exhausted.

But the fight wasn't over for Maw Bettiker. She kicked Red in the ribs, fairly spurred him into new life. She bent down, grabbed his belt, pulled him to his feet, thrust the rifle into his hands.

"Here," she rasped. She looked like a figure of War with gray braids hanging down, and her weak eyes glinting with rage, blinking furiously. "Here—take this gun. Kill 'em both!"

Half dazed, barely able to breathe because Jake's mighty arm had almost mashed his Adam's apple, Red took the rifle. As he turned toward Jake, the big man lurched up. He was half out on his feet but it takes a powerful smash to knock out a man of Jake's strength.

Through his bulging eyes, Jake glimpsed the wavering figure of Brazos Red. Advancing with lined rifle. He saw also, just behind, the revengeful face of Maw Bettiker. His own man lay flat on the ground, dead to the world, with the buffalo gun buried under his limp form.

There was no doubt in Jake's mind that he stared into the eyes of Death when he looked at the New Mexican and the old woman. Nor did he know that Red carried a useless gun.

Panic sent the red blood of life rushing through Jake's body, set his muscles to twitching, stung his wits to action. Blindly, he turned, ran for shelter. Any place to escape just Vengeance.

Jake galloped around the side of the round pole corral. There was a dim hope in his mind that he could escape to the timber, hide out like a coyote with a trap on his leg. But this corral was built out

from a sandstone ledge, and Jake's galloping eventually brought him to the barred corner where the poles were braced against rock. He was trapped. When he realized this, he turned, with bared teeth, and prepared to fight for his life.

Brazos Red, packing the broken gun, urged on by Maw, had followed in. He came suddenly upon Jake Kells who stood there, weaving on his thick legs, whiskered face bloody and mauled as though he had tackled a wildcat. Red wasn't in much better shape, with stained bandage tilted over his right eye, clothing ripped from his body, chin and jaw puffed and swollen from his previous fight with the giant.

"Damn you," gasped Jake Kells. "If you kill me, it's murder. I got no gun."

And as he growled his threat, he wallowed toward Red who stood not six paces distant.

"Damn you," the New Mexican retorted, "if you come an inch nearer, I'll blow yore head into smithereens."

But Kells was past the point of prudence. Panic acts that way on some men. It befuddles their wits and nerves, drives them to reckless acts that brave men would never undertake. Red saw that Jake intended to walk straight down on the rifle. And Red's heart failed because he knew that he held a useless gun, that a bluff would not work again, and that if he came within reach of Jake's huge arms, he would surely die.

There, in the narrow angle formed by the pole corral and the cliff, they faced each other. Dauntless red-haired warrior who knew in his heart that he was already defeated and near death but who would not by word of mouth or twitch of muscle indicate it. Huge giant of a man, as dangerous from panic as a grizzly in a trap.

"Look out! Behind yuh!"

That was the hoarse cry of Maw Bittiker. It was cut off by the drum of hoofs as horsemen swept up to the corral. Two riders came tearing in, low over their saddle horns, hat brims pushed back by the speed of their arrival.

He half turned to meet this new attack. Jake Kells sprang in. Red went down with Jake on his back. He squirmed over, fighting to the last. One of the horsemen quit the saddle while his horse was still on the run. He raced in, spurs jingling, and leather chaps popping. He struck once with his fist. And Brazos Red straightened up, all the fight taken out of him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fire in the Mountains!

THE battered parade of warriors wended its slow way down the valley to the buildings and corrals of Maw's home ranch. A shallow mountain creek gave the location the name of Sourdough because of many marshes along its banks caused by underground springs.

Maw and Red trudged ahead of Kells and his men. They had lashed the New Mexican's wrists behind his back but hadn't tied up the old cattlewoman. So she was free to halt and shake her fist as she heard a distant clamor bleating, and barking, and the jangling of sheep bells on the high divide across the stream.

"I hope every dad-blamed wooly!" she raged, "gits stuck in the bogs along Sourdough Crick!"

Jake Kells leaned down from his saddle—for he had forced one of his men to walk and lead the buckskin outlaw. This was the hour of Jake's triumph.

"I got four thousand head o' mutton up thar'," he roared, "an the men an' dogs tuh put 'em across yore range without gittin' a single damned sheep stuck in the mud. I'll teach you Injun fightin' cow

interests tuh block legal range trails."

"Legal range trails? Yore hull idea, Kells, is to let yore sheep spread when they pass the crick. So they'll git under the bob wire an' feed off my pasture. If Slim Jim was here—"

Kells laughed and pointed toward Red. "He ain't. He's a shuriff an' out huntin' yore outlaw friend this minute."

"Outlaw? I've heard yuh runnin' down this boy. What do yuh mean by outlaw?"

Kells passed over the paper clipping. Red groaned as Maw took it. For there she would scan his damning record. Maw looked at the notice that had occupied a prominent position. Red knew it, word for word. He waited, with shrinking heart, for Maw's outburst against him.

WANTED FOR MURDER
$5,000—DEAD OR ALIVE

Jefferson J. McGee, alias Brazos Red. Six feet tall. . . . Officers warned to take no chances. Known as a friend of Billy the Kid. . . .

The notice was signed by a southwestern sheriff. Red cast a fleeting glance toward Maw as she stood there, frowning down at the paper. Then, suddenly, she whirled and glared up at Jake Kells.

"Danged if I kin read this thing without spec's," she declared. "But if I could, I wouldn't take all the words of all the sheriffs between here an' Hell on this redhead. He's a *man,* Jake Kells. An' from here out, he kin always find, a change of hosses, plenty grub, or whatever he needs at any spread run by the Bettikers. Now —yuh bull-headed, lump-jawed chunk of coyote p'izen—call yore varmints an' signal to yore sheep. Yuh may win this fight today but soon as I get new spec's I'll start campin' on yore trail with a forty-five-ninety black powder musket whut my ol' man killed Injuns with, an' I'll never quit until I throw a chunk of lead through yore ugly liver big enough to choke a small-sized hoss."

That tirade even aroused Pete Budnack was was slowly recovering his wind by riding on a rough horse behind one of his mates. Jake Kells puffed up like a fat bullfrog. His mauled face turned red.

And then, suddenly, he stood up in his stirrups, pointed his six-gun at the sun, and ran off five spaced shots. Beyond the ridge, there sounded a similar signal. A cloud of yellow dust began rising like a pillar. The bleating and barking increased. The jangling bells clanked out a wild refrain.

"They're on the march!" yelled Jake Kells. "Within a half hour, ol' lady, yore ranch will be fed off, slick as a whistle."

THE Bettiker home had been built to resist Indian attacks. It was a one-story, sod-roofed log cabin with a huge rock chimney at one end. The building stood on a high knoll giving a wide view of the surrounding country and also a good field of fire.

Not far from the house stood a log barn, a round pole corral, and a blacksmith shop. Kells motioned the man, who led the buckskin outlaw, in that direction.

"Put that goat-headed hoss in thar'," he ordered, "so we kin keep an eye on it. The ol' lady might try tuh use it agin to fotch the shuriff."

Then Maw and Red were pushed roughly into the cabin. Red sniffed hopefully for there was a big roundup coffee pot on the hot stove and food frying in a pan. A hard and hairy man, with six-gun sagging from his belt, greeted Jake with a grin.

"Everything hunky dory," he allowed. "Both of 'em sittin' thar' like boiled owls." And he jerked a dirty thumb toward a

couple of glum and speechless cowboys who were hog-tied in their chairs. They were silent because one had been gagged with a bandanna and the other with a dish towel.

Kells ran his ugly eyes over the room. Then he turned threateningly upon Pete Budnack.

"You ain't been much use so far today," he growled. "But here's yore chance tuh make good with me. I'm headin' fer the sheep. I'll leave you here in charge of this she-bang. Take special keer of the redhead. Remember, no matter what happens, he's wuth five thousand to us. So keep him. Or I'll work yuh over wuss than he did before."

Pete mumbled through swollen lips, with glowering gaze on Red.

"I'll shore keep him."

"Jim here," Kells indicated the hairy man, "he'll stay tuh help yuh. Now—" he paused on the threshold for a final inspection—"don't take chances. Stay right in here with 'em. Better bar this door after me. Don't let that redhead git within six foot of a gun or anything else he kin shoot or hit with."

"I'll make it plenty hot fer him," Pete promised. "Trust me, boss."

Kells grinned, waved an airy farewell to his prisoners. "When next yuh see me," he said, "it'll be in the dust of four thousand sheep on this side of yore deadline."

The door slammed. Hoofs drummed on the trail. Jake Kells was gone.

The war's on," Maw Bettiker allowed.

"An' a hot one," growled Budnack. He called Jim to help him. "I said I'd make it plenty warm for this red wolf," he went on. "An' here's what we'll do."

They threw Red who couldn't resist. They gagged him, tied up his legs, and finally anchored him to one end of the kitchen stove. He lay with a chunk of splintery cedar stove wood for a pillow. Then Pete called to old Maw.

"Us gents is hungry," he said. "Take charge of this cookin'. An' remember it's grub jest fer Kells' layout."

Maw stood with red fists balanced on her broad hips. She looked Budnack over with hostile eyes. "I kin sling a skillet with the best of 'em," she sniffed, but danged if I'll cook one bite fer a lousy, pop-eyed sheep-herder like you. Not one bite. Why I'd ruther cook fried chicken fer a hydryphoby skunk."

Budnack sneered, kicked Red in the ribs, called to his mate, Jim.

"If she won't cook," he said, "jest pull her friend nearer the stove where he kin feel the heat better."

It *was* hot. Maw smelt scorching flannel. She bowed her head and said: "You win," and walked to the stove. Pete sat down on an edge of the center table with the buffalo gun across his bony knees. Jim leaned against the wall near the door, which had been closed but not bolted. As Maw began rattling skillets and pans, the clamor of the approaching herds became louder. Now could be heard the high-pitched yells of men, the crack of guns.

"Jake's thar," observed Pete. "He's shore pushin' the lead! They'll be across Sourdough in fifteen minutes."

"Jest in time fer dinner," laughed Jim.

RED, lying on the floor, felt a ticklish sensation in his throat. At first, he blamed it on the tight gag. But when his eyes began to burn and water, he knew this wasn't the reason. He sniffed the smell of smoke, the same smell as had come the day before from Jerry Malone's burning wagon. And he wondered if Kells had set the shack afire.

But Kells' men were here. And apparently not worrying about fire. Jim

was rolling a smoke. Pete sat licking his lips while Maw Bettiker fried spuds. The tied-up punchers began to blink. Slow tears started down their cheeks.

Maw Bettiker's face was flushed. Vigorously she rattled the stove, and cussed under her breath because it wouldn't draw right.

"Used it thirty years," Red heard her mutter. "Whut's come over the blamed thing?"

Now Red could see thin films of smoke pouring out a crack in the pipe. Jim had stopped rolling his smoke and was clearing his throat. Pete Budnack rubbed his eyes, looked suspiciously at Maw.

"What's up?" he began.

She answered by raising a lid. A sheet of fire leaped up; a red flash that touched off a dish towel hanging from a wire over the stove.

"Fire!" Maw yelled. *"Fire!"* She jumped away from the stove. Her eyes bulged. Her shoulders shook with apparent terror. "It's goin' to blow up!"

Pete Budnack's boots hit the floor. He took one look at the blaze above the stove, the black smoke pouring into the cabin. He recalled how near he had come to being roasted alive in Malone's wagon. He made one wild leap toward the door. His buffalo gun was forgotten.

"Let me out!" he yelped.

But Jim's big body barred his departure. Alarmed at Maw's shriek, Jim had opened the door just in time to block Pete.

Maw Bettiker leaped toward the smoking stove. She seized the big coffee pot. She whirled on her heels, gave Pete Budnack all the morning java between his shoulder blades. And it was smoking hot. He yelled and squirmed. Yelled again. Fairly clawed over Jim's frame. And when he was outside, he rolled on the ground like a dog.

Maw jumped over and picked up the buffalo gun. Smoke now filled the room. She heard muffled groans as men choked with gags over their faces. It had been Maw's plan to rush out, resist the crossing of the sheep with the buffalo gun. But here were friends who needed her now. She reached for a butcher knife, and slashed at Red's bonds.

"Git the gun," she panted. "Git outside while I turn loose my men."

He grabbed the huge Sharps that carried a fifty caliber slug heavy enough to knock over a buffalo bull at six hundred yards.

As he plunged out of the cabin, he saw Pete Budnack rolling in the dirt. And just beyond Pete, Jim had turned and was freeing his six-gun.

Red cleared his lungs, dropped down on his hams, for he knew that a buffalo gun kicks like a bay steer.

He saw Jim chop down his six-gun. There wasn't time to throw the big Sharps' stock tight against a curved shoulder. Red flung up the cannon, picked up Jim with the front sight, and pulled the trigger. Jim's gun exploded into the air. For the Sharps slug had knocked him flat on his back.

But Red had also suffered. The kick had stretched him out on the ground. Pete Budnack, leaping up at the sound of gunfire, saw his enemy helpless for the moment. He raked a long knife from back of his collar and swooped in to cut Red from collar button to brisket.

But something that resembled a spitting, scratching bobcat dropped on Pete's back as he ran in—a back that was already blistered to a red heat. And as Pete went to his knees, a second object lit on top of the struggling cursing heap.

WHEN Brazos Red struggled up, he saw that the two objects were respectively Jerry Malone and the boy's

collie dog. The boy sat on Pete's back, pounding away at any part of Pete's person that his thudding fists could reach. The collie had escaped with most of Pete's pants.

Then Maw Bettiker and her punchers came boiling out. They pulled the boy and dog off the howling man, and lifted Pete to his feet.

"My pants, Mis' Bettiker," he pleaded. "Fer Gosh sakes, let me go."

"Dang yore pants," roared Maw. "Yuh jest tried to murder my best friend. I don't know where this kid an' his purp come from. But if it hadn't been fer them, wa'al Red woulda been cold beef. An' fer that—"

Vigorously she booted Pete until he howled for mercy. She called one of her punchers. "Fotch a rope," she said, "take him in, an' tie him up to that stove like he did Red. We'll keep him warmed up fer his boss."

"Don't take me in *thar!*" howled Pete. "Yore cabin's *afire.*"

Jerry Malone cut in. "No such thing," he explained. "It was me started all that smoke. I trailed Red an' saw what happened at the corral. No chance then to save him. But when Kells rode off, I took my dog an' climbed up on the roof. I took off my shirt an' rolled it up an' stuffed it down the chimney. Figured to smoke you fellers out so I could mebbe sick my dog on you when you wasn't lookin'."

Maw grinned through her sooty mask and gathered Jerry to her ample bosom. "Yo're a boy right after my own heart," she declared. "Smart an' upstandin'. Nuthin' I know agin' yuh."

"Ma'am," Jerry said hesitantly, "I jest got through herdin' sheep."

She snorted then and thrust him away. But took him back after Red had explained. For a moment, things turned into an Old Home Week celebration—until one of the punchers yelled excitedly:

"Here comes the sheep!"

A moving mass of dirty gray color was moving down the bluff across the creek in a shifting cloud of dust. Horsemen could be glimpsed in a haze as they rode the flanks and the drags. There rose an incessant clangor of bells, a deafening confusion of human shouts, sheep bleats, and barking of dogs.

Maw Bettiker stood here on her homestead, free, and with a gun at hand. But there came destruction that bullets wouldn't stop, nor forty men. For sheep will not turn back when dogs are harrying the rear. Sheep fear dogs above men—and here were four thousand of the dumb brutes, innocent tools used by Jake Kells to ruin Maw Bettiker.

It was one of Maw's cowboys who thought of the steers in the pasture. "Let's cut the wire," he suggested. "Stampede the cattle toward the sheep. Mebbe that'll stop 'em."

"Git goin'!" cried his comrade. Maw echoed the shout. Even as her men departed, stable-wards, she dropped to one knee, slapped another cartridge into the Sharps carbine, and killed a bell wether across the creek in the lead of the bawling thousands. But then it was a lucky shot for Maw hadn't had time to locate her extra pair of spectacles.

BRAZOS RED forgot his weariness, his hunger, even Jerry who had rescued him. There came Jake Kells, the human hog who yearned to strip an old woman of all she possessed, the man who had brutally hog-tied and gagged a New Mexican warrior. Red ripped the six-gun from the numb hand of big Jim. He went curving off toward the stable.

"Whar' yuh goin'?" Maw yelled.

"Tuh git a hoss!" he shouted.

"No use," she answered. "Jest mounts down thar' fer my two men."

"There's *always* a hoss fer Brazos Red!" he snarled.

And there was. He came out of the corral gate atop the buckskin. He was riding for first money. It would have taken two or three outlaws to dump Red this minute. He was fighting mad from his charred boots to the fringe around his neck that marked the remnants of his shirt. His red hair stood on end, his agreeable manner, as noted in the reward notice, had totally departed.

As he went slashing toward the creek, riding high, and peering through the dust for sight of Jake Kells, the Bettiker cowboys cut the pasture wire and whooped out the lead of the longhorn herd. The big brutes tore down toward the creek with yipping riders hard at their heels.

"Hit 'em on the left flank!" yelled Maw as the herd went past. "There's soft ground up the crick. Mebbe we kin bog them sheep."

And down again on her knees she went to blast away with the old Sharps.

The lead cattle struck the sheep as the mutton wave rolled across Sourdough Creek. Now there was gunfire for Kells' men saw the stampede and opened up with their guns. But Brazos Red, out on a flank for good shooting light, groaned and growled that the cattle would *never* turn the woolies. The main band split to right and left for ever behind were the barking dogs. And sheep fear dogs even above men, and cattle, and guns.

Then Red saw a slim figure dart across open ground as the first of the sheep surged up on Maw's land.

"Jerry!" Red gasped. And he checked the buckskin that now was a lathered and wiser horse.

What was the boy doing out there where longhorns ran wild and bullets were zipping past? Then Red understood. For Jerry flung his arms into the air. It was a familiar signal. Red had seen herders use it before.

" 'Way around 'em!" Jerry yelled.

His collie, catching the arm signal with bright eyes, turned savagely, and plunged fiercely into a flank of the herd. Lead sheep halted, flung back their heads. Then they *baahed,* turned in their tracks, and went plunging back through the main herd now in Sourdough Creek.

Here then was complete confusion with sheep, men, cattle, and dogs all hashed up in Sourdough Creek. It irked the savage soul of Jake Kells. He came plunging up the stream's bank to ascertain the cause. He spotted young Jerry Malone, raised his quirt, and headed toward the boy.

"You renegade!" Jake bawled. "Yo're a sheep-herder."

A man barred Jake's path; a battered man with red hair and snapping blue eyes. "Yo're wrong," said Brazos Red. "The boy done quit a while back."

"You?" roared Jake.

And he dropped his quirt and went for his six-gun.

TWO Colts drummed together. Jake's bullet cut a wisp of red hair off the New Mexican's head above his right ear. Red's slug took Jake just above his belt buckle. The sheepman grabbed for his saddle-horn, then slumped, and hit the ground just in front of his pony's left front leg. That cayuse snorted, turned on the space of a dime, and went in a hurry across the creek.

Red sat the buckskin, gazing down rather regretfully on Jake.

Then he turned the buckskin. He gazed toward the cabin. Maw Bettiker was coming toward him. Beside her walked a tall, slim man leading a horse. Red saw that other riders were now trot-

ting down toward the bawling sheep. And that all carried rifles.

Maw stopped in front of Red. The slim man—lean faced and grizzled—smiled under his crisp mustache as he regarded Red's battered appearance.

"You look," he allowed, "as though you'd been to the wars. Soot all over yore face an' hair. Shirt clawed off yore back. But I'm thankin' yuh fer what yuh did tuh help out Mis' Bettiker. I heard last night late, after I got back to town, about Kells' threats. I been ridin' hard tuh git here with a posse."

"Posse?" gasped Red.

His staring gaze took in the gleaming star on the tall man's vest. He rocked in his saddle. He held a six-gun but his hand was trembling. The black words of a murder reward floated before him.

"Five thousand bucks—dead or alive," Red thought. "An' here stands a John Law tuh collect it."

"Meet Sheriff Jim Malone," Maw said beamingly. "Not only a sheriff. But also my son-in-law. Fer he married my only child, my da'ter Amandy."

"Malone?" whispered Red. Then he looked toward young Jerry. The boy had mentioned that he had an uncle somewhere in Wyoming. "Kid," said the New Mexican, "what town *yuh* from?"

"Boggs Center, New Hampshire."

Jim Malone whirled. "Boggs Center?" he bellowed. "Say—that's my ol' home town. What's yore name, youngster?"

"Malone—Jerry Malone. When my folks passed on, I come out to punch cows. But I could only git a job herdin' sheep."

"Sheep?" Sheriff Jim took the boy in his arms. "Say—yo're the livin' image of my brother Jerry. You'll herd no more sheep. Yo're a cowman's boy from now on."

But Maw stepped in. She took young Jerry away from the law.

"I give you a gal, Jim Malone," she said fiercely, "so I reckon you'll let a lonely ol' woman raise a boy tuh be a proper cowman."

Jim Malone stepped back. He smiled. "I reckon," he said.

Brazos Red turned Buck's head. He eased away, hoping to get a safe start through the haze where the posse was pushing the sheep back up the bluffs. He didn't wish to plug young Jerry's uncle—and Maw's son-in-law . . .

"Where you goin'?" Maw called.

"North," he answered.

She narrowed her wise old eyes. Then she turned to Jim. "You git down there and take charge of yore men," she ordered, "or I'll turn yuh in to the county commissioners fer a lazy, good-fer-nuthin' shuriff."

He grinned and mounted his horse. As he rode past Brazos Red there was a knowing look in Sheriff Jim's keen eyes. But after all, he mused, as he cut down through the yellow haze, an officer could be pardoned for not noting a bullet dimple when it was half hidden by stove soot.

"You," said Maw to Red when Jim had disappeared, "you git off that hoss an' come in an' rest while I dish yuh out some grub."

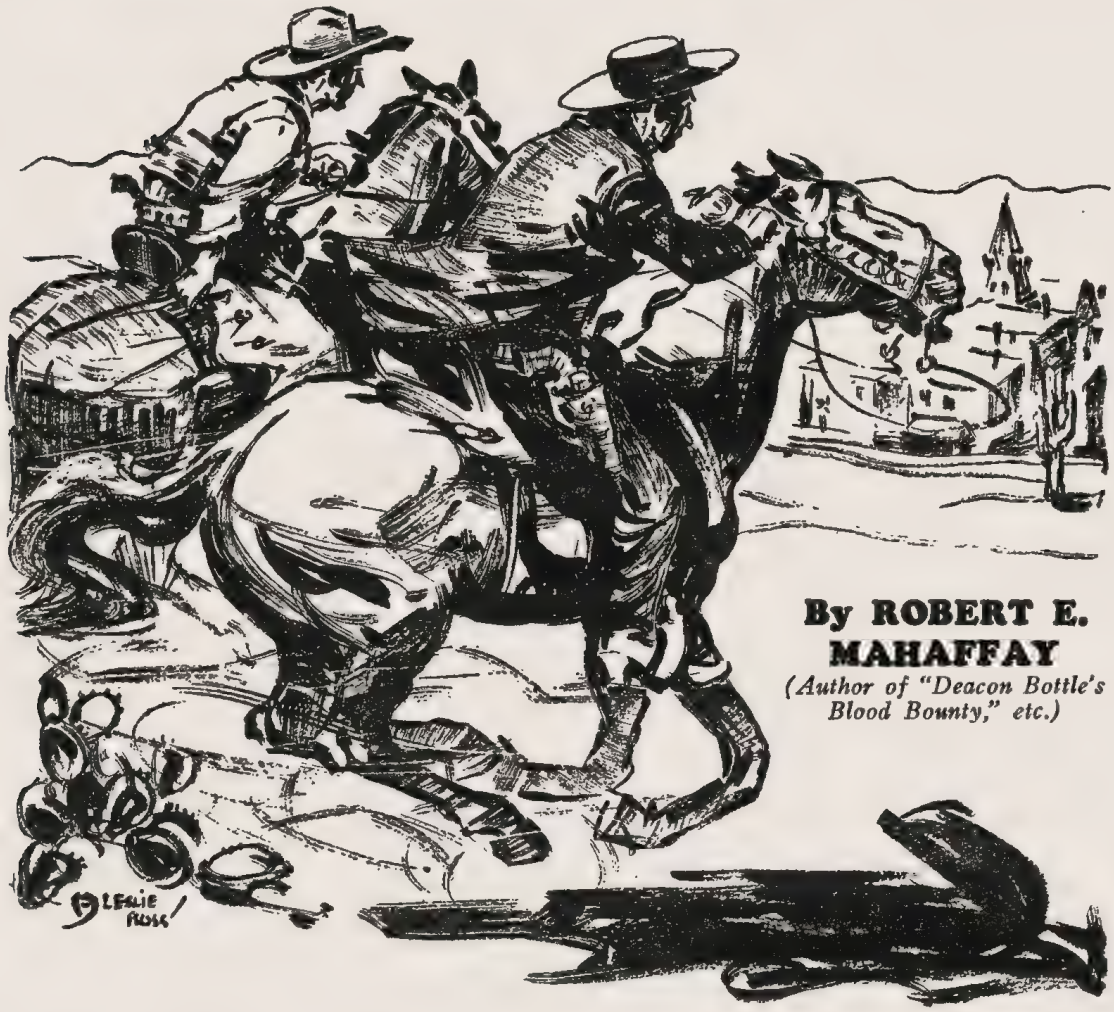
"Ma'am," Red said honestly, "I'm afeered if I git off this hoss, I'll never git on him agin'. He's a powerful on-sartain hoss."

She smiled. "Then sit yore saddle," she answered, "an' in a jiffy I'll be out with yore grub in a tray. Regular hotel service."

And Red was glad he waited. For Maw proved she could shake a hot skillet as skillfully as she had held her grass against Jake Kells' bleating sheep.

THE END

Deacon Bottle—Star Toter



By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY
(Author of "Deacon Bottle's Blood Bounty," etc.)

Deacon Bottle was ready to stand up against the whole blood-mad town to help his friend wipe out an ugly chapter of past history. For the Deacon, himself, had once been renegade, and knew how hard it is to regain a good name once it is lost.

DEACON BOTTLE — benevolent renegade and quick-triggering man-of-God—had been accused at various times of many things, some of which were not heartily sanctioned by the law. He had never been accused, however, of being unable to scent trouble if it lay within a dozen miles of wherever he happened to be.

He was scenting it now. The odor of approaching difficulties had been in his nostrils for the past two days, and because of it he was delaying his departure from the town of Antelope Springs.

So he sat quietly in the office of Sheriff Dode Case, his portly frame slouched comfortably, his pinkish countenance beaming, as if totally unaware that Antelope Springs was seething with an unholy lust to kill.

The lean and stunted Case, chewing savagely on a cigar which he had forgotten to light, abruptly ceased his hurried pacing, threw open the door of the office, listened to the hum of sound from without, then hurled the panel shut again with a

crash. That former sound reached the Deacon but did not destroy his composure. He knew well enough what it meant. That vibrant and ominous hum was boiling out of the Desert Rat Saloon which lay across and a few paces down-street from the sheriff's office. In the Desert Rat some score or more gun-slinging hardcases were screwing up their rancor with hot liquor to the point of surging out and attempting to lynch Sheriff Dode Case.

Case scowled as he whirled around and directed a warning glance at the Deacon. He was a somber man of middle age, with a hawk-like face and eyebrows which projected over sunken sockets. "Better get the hell out of here," he advised.

Deacon Bottle patted a stomach which taxed the buttons of his confining black coat. "The good Lord didn't have fast traveling in mind when he sent in my order," he murmured. "An' seeing as how, in a manner of speaking, I got you into this, I'll stick."

"I don't regret it," snapped Case. He began to pace the little room again, his face stiffening with angry determination.

With the lids dropped half over his mild blue eyes, the Deacon examined the stunted figure of the sheriff. He knew that Sheriff Dode Case of Antelope Springs was making the biggest fight of his life—a fight to go straight, regardless of the consequences. He had tried once before to go straight, and had failed! He had come to Antelope Springs a wanted man, determined to wipe out the black record which lay behind him. Then to the town had come Eli Dorset, shrewd, remorseless. He had threatened Case with exposure, used him secretly to further his evil schemes. He had built up a strong organization of lawlessness in Antelope Springs, and Case had been powerless to check it. Then, to back a play of Deacon Bottle's, and in a desperate effort to free himself, Sheriff Case had aided in the killing of his nemesis, Eli Dorset.

That killing had been like a lighted match dropped in a powder keg. The leader was gone but the organization was not. One Lafe Arnston had gathered up the reins and sworn to wipe out Dode Case. Though no definite instances could be cited, word was spread that Case had been in league with the dead Dorset. The town was whipped into a furore. Under cover of the feverish excitement, Lafe Arnston was launching a lynch-mob. He would dispose of Case, get himself or one of his men appointed sheriff, and then institute a reign of terror in the town.

DEACON BOTTLE had seen it coming. But in that battle with Dorset, Dode Case had saved his life, so the Deacon was staying—to see Dode Case win his fight or to die with him.

Boots clumped on the walk in front of the office. Case whirled about, his gun drawn, as the door was pushed open. Slowly he dropped the weapon back into its holster. The newcomer was tall, with a long nose and fiery countenance which oozed perspiration. He was Jake Marshal, mayor of Antelope Springs. "The Council is meetin' this afternoon," he told Case bluntly. "We want you there to explain the talk that's been floatin' around."

A hoarse laugh escaped the sheriff. "Sure, I'll be there, if I'm still alive." He exploded bitterly. "You damned fool, don't you know what's going to happen?"

The mayor squirmed anxiously. "Some of the folks is blowin' off, that's all. They wouldn't start no lynching."

"The hell they wouldn't. Go out and find yourself a seat where you can get a good view."

"You got to explain," persisted Marshal stubbornly. He stumbled outside again, shaking his head and mumbling to himself.

"Leave the door open," suggested the

Deacon. "We can see better." Unbuttoning his long black coat, he carefully examined his two silver-mounted sixguns. "Can they prove anything on you, Case?" he asked casually.

The sheriff shook his head. "No. I made arrangements through Dorset. The rest of the gang suspected the tie-up, but they can't pin anything on me."

Deacon Bottle grinned. His own wayward life was a welter of incidents which other people suspected but could not prove. "The Lord's a great feller for giving a man a break thataway," he nodded piously. "We'll hang an' rattle—an' see what happens."

The low, ominous hum from across the street flowed through the doorway; it mounted in intensity, burst into a harsh clamor of raucous voices. The muffled drive of many booted feet against wooden flooring contributed the bass tones to that vicious symphony.

"They're coming," snapped the Deacon. He slipped his bulk into the doorway, blocking it. "Watch the back, Case. Don't let any of them gents get ideas about the broncs. We may be needing 'em."

A RAGGED queue of men poured through the swinging doors of the Desert Rat Saloon. The leaders slowed up till they had bunched, then they came pelting across through the dust which swirled up angrily about them. The Deacon grimly hoped that they could be stopped as hang-mad mobs had been stopped before. With the cool speed for which they were famous his two guns flipped up into the open. That muscular relaxation from which he could leap into instant action settled over him. He could see the yellow length of a new manila rope shining through the dust film which rolled toward him with the crowd.

"Close enough, gents!" he boomed, and the crowd slowed down, surging awkwardly back like the water in a kettle which is about to boil over.

A burly man in the front rank snarled, "You got two seconds to shift yore carcass, mister. Move it or git it knocked out o' there with lead."

"It was Lafe Arnston, self-appointed leader of the outlaw element. Heavy-set, lowering, with a stubble of beard which reached to his eyes, he was a man of crude and vicious action, not cunning.

Staring at him and the men behind him, Deacon Bottle realized suddenly that this was no ordinary hang mob. It was a killer crew, bent on murder, the scummy riff-raff of the out-trails, conscienceless gunslingers who would cut him down, hang Case and then rape the town without compunction. The Deacon's jaw tightened; slow wrath battered at his calm. Though he knew that his life might be the price, he was glad that he had stayed.

"Leave your hog-legs put," he warned, his voice rising. "First man to try it gets a slug to chew on."

"The hell you say!" roared one of the crowd, his hand flashing down.

Deacon Bottle's right hand gun barked savagely, and the man went down. The Deacon shot twice more into the dirt of the street, hoping that the crowd would break. But it only became a hubbub of howling confusion—and guns began to crack wildly.

"Scatter out!" bawled Arnston. "Pour it to the son! There's nobody with him but Case."

In that first instant of mad scrambling the Deacon held the advantage. Bullets chewed at his coat or slammed into the building front at his side, but in the clamoring mêlée no one took time to aim. The Deacon's guns stammered in roaring bursts, though he did not shoot to kill. He wanted that crowd to break, but it would not, and in another moment the mob would clear enough to send a hail of lead ripping into his body.

Beaten, Deacon Bottle sprang back inside the office, slamming the door and leaping to one side just as half a dozen bullets splintered through the panel. He caught the shoulder of Sheriff Case as he came running from the rear, his hawk-like face haggard and grim.

"Get back," the Deacon snapped. "We can't do anything more." He was panting. A slug coming through the door had stung his ribs. "Nothing left . . . but to make a run for it . . . 'fore they think to cut us off."

Case would have remained, desperately willing to die there in that bullet-whipped room where he had made and lost his good name. A mighty shove from one of Deacon Bottle's sturdy arms sent him staggering toward the rear. They raced down a corridor flanked by empty cells and burst out into a plot of open ground just as a gunman came running around the corner of the building. He flung up his weapon but not soon enough to forestall the roar of the Deacon's sixgun.

It was fifty feet to the corral. They made it while the gunman, on his knees, clutching a smashed shoulder, screeched out a warning which was all but lost in the chatter of gunfire from the front. The horses were saddled, for the Deacon had seen to that. Together the two hit leather and lined out in a swift dash before the encircling ends of Arnston's battle line reached the rear of the office.

Bullets were thrown after them, but they had slipped out of short-gun range and the lead fell short. By the time pursuit could be organized out of the confusion they would have a lead which could not be eaten away.

SHERIFF DODE CASE rode in brooding silence. He drew in his lathered mount and faced the Deacon suddenly. Something had been damning up in his mind. It burst out now with a strained fierceness.

"I ain't going no farther, Deacon. I'm going back!"

Deacon Bottle chuckled. "I was kind of hoping you'd say that."

"I mean it," rapped Case huskily. "I belong back there. I got a wife and kids. What are they going to think of an old man who ain't got the guts to take what's comin' to him? I run away once before in my life an', by God, I ain't doin' it again."

"What the hell will you do when you get there?"

"I'll do what I hired out to do. Clean out Arnston or get salted down tryin'."

"There ain't no 'or' about it," stated Deacon Bottle flatly. "You'd just get salted down. I've seen widows with medals before. Medals are damned poor consolation when there ain't enough grub on the table for a square meal. I know you got the guts. But there's a smarter way than going back an' getting yourself shot up just to prove it."

"How?" demanded Case with the eagerness of desperation.

"By stayin' alive. Dead sheriffs can't stop riots."

"And set up here waitin' till it's safe to go back, you mean?" Case cried bitterly.

"Hell, no. We'll be doin' blamed little setting. They're too strong for the two of us to tackle all together. All right. We'll take 'em on one at a time."

Dode Case's mouth dropped. A new light came into his eyes in their sunken sockets. "You think we could get away with it?"

"I don't *know* we can, any more'n you do," the Deacon said slowly. "I say it's worth tryin'. How many of those skunks in Arnston's outfit got records?"

"Most of 'em." Case's tone grew rasping. "With a sheriff who couldn't afford to be particular, Antelope Springs got jammed with hardcases. Figgered they was safe, d'you see. I'd burn the reward

notices fast as they come in."

Deacon Bottle grunted and a flame leapt into his mild blue eyes. He waved a pudgy hand at the surrounding hills. "From now on this here is our jail. We'll snake them wanted gents out of town one at a time an' corral 'em up here."

Case looked steadily at the Deacon. "Murder?" he said.

"Nope," replied Deacon Bottle. "Hog killin' ain't in my line. We'll just be ridin' herd on 'em till the right parties can claim 'em."

IT was a strange combination which went to work in a strange way then in the hills that cupped the little town of Antelope Springs, haven of outlawry, cradle of violence. Deacon Bottle, the portly renegade man-of-God, and Sheriff Dode Case who was trying to wipe out a past of deceit and treachery to the law he served. That they were juggling with their lives the Deacon would not have admitted, but it was true. Each foray into town meant the possibility of exposure and quick death before flaming guns. Both knew, too, that the sheriff's flight would serve as mute evidence of his guilt to the rest of the townsmen. Nothing could be done about that. It had to be accepted.

Their initial nocturnal excursion into Antelope Springs yielded a sullen-faced gunhawk by the name of "Red" Clinker who, according to Case, was badly wanted in Idaho on several charges of stage robbery. Clinker staggered out of the Desert Rat Saloon at three in the morning and made the fatal mistake of trying to navigate along the board walk instead of weaving down the middle of the street. Half way to his destination he passed a dark opening between two buildings. His bleary eyes recorded no image, and he felt nothing after a stunning blow on his skull until he awoke to find himself draped securely across a saddle. Cursing and struggling, he tried to reach a gun which was no longer in his holster.

In their hill hideout the Deacon and Sheriff Case calmly unloaded him. When Case began to test a length of his saddle rope the Deacon shook his head. "Folks have got a habit of not stayin' put when they're tied with rope," he advised solemnly. "Squirm out of it if they ain't watched, and raise merry hell. Ever hear of anybody tryin' to rassle his way out of six foot of bob-wire?"

He strode off into the night and returned shortly with a springy section of barbed wire. With his hands, ankles and knees tightly wound with the sharp pointed stuff, and a strand or two more lashing his stomach to the bole of a tree, Red Clinker abandoned any notion he might have had about kicking up a fight. The barbs gouged painfully, drawing little trickles of blood, but they were sharp enough to gash him to the bone if he struggled at all. He wisely confined himself to a scorching blast of profanity until the Deacon, apparently in pious consternation, blocked the flow with a gag torn from the outlaw's shirt tail.

Red Clinker was the first of six.

Then a man whom the authorities of Wyoming had diligently sought for three years entered his cabin late at night without examining the interior before he stepped inside. A day or two later two nondescript renegades who were disputing over the favors of a certain dance hall girl withdrew, out of deference to the lady's whim, to the outskirts of the town to settle their difference. Neither of them returned, and a later hunt failed to unearth their bodies. Another outlaw, advancing into a vacant lot with drawn gun to investigate a suspicious noise, heard a second suspicious noise behind him too late to explore it. A club descended on his right temple as he whirled

and he was given plenty of time to explore the outlying hills with his eyes while wired to a tree in the hideout. The last one went to sleep in the gutter in a drunken stupor and woke to the pricking of the barbs as his wrists were bound.

ON one of the earlier trips Dode Case insisted on the risk of seeing his wife. A pang went through Deacon Bottle as he witnessed that meeting. Eleanor Case was a slightly built woman with corn-colored hair and blue eyes which showed the hurt of worry. Etched lines of sadness about her mouth made her seem older than she was. Her eyes, resting on the Deacon, gave him more thanks than any words could have conveyed.

She understood her husband, probably, more truly than he did himself. She had known what Case had been doing during the reign of Eli Dorset, and she received eagerly the news of his complete break with the outlaws. There was something pathetic in the way Dode Case, who could face blazing sixguns as bravely as any man can, stumbled awkwardly when he explained to his wife his decision to go straight.

When he was through she nodded. "Whatever comes of it, Dode, I'll be glad," she told him.

Dode Case kissed his wife. "I'll come through it," he promised. "If I don't, you won't have nothing to be ashamed of."

With a pride the energy of which brought a choking lump to the Deacon's throat, Dode Case took him into the bedroom to see "his kids." There were two of them, a boy of about seven who sat up and blinked at the sudden light, and a little girl of two with the corn-colored hair of her mother. The boy called out cheerfully and wanted to play with his father.

When they had left the room Dode Case said hoarsely, "It's on account of them more'n anything else," and Deacon Bottle shuffled uneasily. He was wondering how much hope there was of the sheriff living to play with that son of his as he wanted to.

After that first meeting, it was from Eleanor Case that they got their information on what was happening during the daylight hours in the town. Lafe Arnston, they learned, was growing more ugly, his men more brazen. They swaggered openly through the streets, defiant toward the peaceful citizens of Antelope Springs. Gone was the tight check of cunning which Eli Dorset had held over them. Arnston was surly and vicious. The disappearance of one man after another had angered him, and into that anger had crept a trace of fear. He suspected the missing Sheriff Case, and he had come to the Case home, trying brutally to force the knowledge from Eleanor. She knew the location of the hideout, but she had refused to admit it. Serious trouble had been averted by the intervention of neighbors.

When Dode Case heard that he growled deep in his throat like a trapped cougar. Deacon Bottle had gripped his arm and held him from striding out into the street in search of Lafe Arnston. Case would have killed him if he were to die for it the instant following.

"Later!" the Deacon snapped at him. "If we lose you now the whole thing'll go to hell."

THOSE six men were the last they took out of Antelope Springs. They tried for a seventh, though Deacon Bottle left the hideout with a strange warning plucking at him. The Deacon felt things like that—a faint stirring in his mind which reason could not explain, but also, could not down. The plan had been working too smoothly. A bad break was due.

It came. Lafe Arnston arranged a trap for the two night prowlers who were throwing his outlaw ranks into confusion. Crude and direct as his mental activity was, he had hit upon the explanation of his losses.

Crouching in the deep shadows which clung to the side of the Desert Rat Saloon, the Deacon and Sheriff Case saw a man push through the swinging doors. He lurched drunkenly, almost fell, then staggered toward them, supporting himself with one hand against the building front.

The Deacon could feel Case's muscles tightening close against him. "'Lefty' Flannigan," the sheriff muttered. "Three counts of murder against him."

Concealed by the hovering darkness, Deacon Bottle's round face wore a puzzled frown. "Wait a minute," he whispered. "There's somethin'—"

But Dode Case, driven by the passion of revenge, was too eager to be restrained. As the drunk came abreast of their hiding place he sprang out, club upraised.

"Get back!" the Deacon roared. Instantly his ponderous frame had swung forward. He caught Case around the body before the club could fall and hurled him back to the ground in the shadows.

In the meantime, with an alertness which belied his apparently helpless state, Lefty Flannigan had dropped flat on the walk at the first sound of Case's feet behind him. Deacon Bottle himself was leaping back out of the faint luminousness of the street when the harsh crackle of shots rent the night stillness. Lead chunked from two angles into the bare boards over their heads as the Deacon and Case stretched flat. One of the bullets had bored through the flesh of the Deacon's thigh.

Lafe Arnston's heavy voice bawled commands and curses. Figures began to flit in the dimness across the street. Deacon Bottle laid a restraining hand on Case's gun which was glinting in the sheriff's hand. "Don't shoot," he whispered. "They think they got us, but they'll be plenty careful about comin' to see. Keep low and slide back out of here."

A moment later Arnston was howling, "Riddle the sons! If they ain't dead already they will be." A second blast of gunfire swept the shadows which had so recently sheltered the Deacon and Case. Unhit, the two men reached the rear end of the passageway which gave out on a dark and narrow alley. Low voices drifted to them.

"Go on in. They're dead or they'd uh come out by now."

"You ain't tied down. Go in yourself."

"Why me? Gettin' boggery, are yuh?"

"Not any. But there's no sense in either of us headin' in there. Like as not Arnston would gun us, thinkin' we was them."

Deacon Bottle's jaw tightened. They were cut off. Men had been placed in the alley this time to cut them off. Gripped by the vital danger of their position, with only brief seconds left to them, the Deacon's mind searched furiously for a means of escape. Then, in the darkness, a smile crept over his plump lips.

Feeling for Case's face, he clapped a pudgy hand over the sheriff's mouth, and groaned agonizingly. That groan sounded like the last wretched exhalation of a dying man.

The Deacon's voice broke out in a mutter—a mutter that seemed wrenched out of a well of pain but which was still loud enough to carry. "Case! Case! I can't go no farther. I'm all shot to hell. Can't lift my hand. Case! Say somethin'. You ain't dead are you? . . . My God, so they got you too, did they? . . . Hell of a way

to go out, shot full of slugs in an alley." His straining voice seemed to wander. "Anyhow, the marshals will be here any time now. Nothin' like U. S. Marshals to clean up a place. I only wish . . . " Drained of its last strength, his voice drifted into silence. "Hold still, you idiot!" he hissed into Case's ear.

Running feet sounded in the alley. A man bellowed, "Hey, Arnston! Arnston! You got 'em. Here they are—all shot to—" His words broke off as he plunged into the gap between the buildings and his forehead collided with the down-sweeping barrel of Deacon Bottle's silver-mounted sixgun. The second of the two outlaw ambushers tried to halt his rush, throwing up his Colts. Dode Case, released from the Deacon's grip, ran at him shooting. The roar thundered terrifically in the confined space, and the outlaw slid to the ground.

Then Deacon Bottle and Case jumped over the two bodies and ran through the darkness. More shots spattered behind them, and a howling jumble of shouted imprecations pursued them. They reached their horses, tethered beyond the outskirts.

DAWN found them at the hideout, Case still glum over their failure. "How'd you know that guy was only playin' drunk?" he demanded.

Deacon Bottle shrugged. "A drunk'll lunge against a door—throw his weight at it an' have trouble getting his balance again. Flannigan pushed through easy-like, and *then* started to stagger."

The Deacon's leg was troubling him, but the wound was a clean one and, with care, would not be dangerous. After releasing and feeding their prisoners one by one, he and Case lay smoking, pondering the next move. The end to their night raids had come; that much was certain. On the spur of the moment Deacon Bottle had planted the lie concerning the coming of U. S. Marshals. On an outside chance it might further alarm Arnston and lead to his evacuation of the town.

In the early afternoon Case mounted a neighboring ridge to sweep the country with a pair of field glasses. Deacon Bottle remained below, still puzzling over the next step to be taken. The affair had reached an impasse. Arnston would be on his guard against them in Antelope Springs; they could accomplish nothing if they did not leave the hills.

The first intimation the Deacon had that the matter would be settled for him was the sound of Dode Case charging headlong through the brush into camp.

"Eleanor!" the sheriff gasped. "Coming this way. Hell bent!"

They saddled swiftly, both struck grimly silent by the possible import of the information. Half a mile below the hideout they met her. Eleanor Case's corn-colored hair had fallen about her shoulders. She was without hat or coat, and the calm of her face was erased by a consuming grief. There were no tears in her eyes, but a hardness had come into them which brought a pulsing ache to Deacon Bottle's heart.

She tried to steady her voice, but it came out brokenly. "Dode, they've taken our boy. They've taken Ted. Arnston did it. He went mad last night when you got away. He swears he'll make the town pay for it."

"What for?" cried Case hoarsely.

"I don't know. Arnston did it, that's all."

They waited to hear no more. Deacon Bottle and Sheriff Dode Case exchanged one hot, understanding look. The waiting game could be played no longer. It was showdown now, two men against overwhelming odds. They did not stop to

calculate the advantage which lay with Lafe Arnston and his gunmen.

Eleanor Case's mount had already been run into the ground, and the two men pulled swiftly away from her. They exchanged no words as they spurred with a savage recklessness out of the hills toward Antelope Springs. Both knew what they were going to do; both knew how small was their chance of coming through it alive.

In the burning glare of mid-afternoon the town emerged in a hollow between gradually rising slopes. Even from a distance the drab huddle of buildings seemed endowed with a strange life. A film of dust hovered over it, shimmering and translucent. As the Deacon and Case swung down toward it a rider burst from one of the street ends, lashing his pony frantically. He saw the two oncoming men, swerved to meet them. It was Jake Marshal, mayor of the town, a look of abject fright stamped on his fiery countenance.

"Arnston!" he shouted as they pulled down to a momentary halt beside him. "He's looting the town! Making a clean sweep 'fore he clears out. When them marshals comin', Case? I heard—"

"There ain't no marshals," Case roared. "An' there won't be. Where the hell are you going?"

"Why I thought—"

One of Deacon Bottle's big hands darted out and caught the fear-stricken mayor by the shirt collar. "Get back there," he rasped. "You're deputized, same as me. Round up every man in Antelope Springs able to tote a gun. We'll blow Lafe Arnston off the streets."

"I ain't a fightin' man," wailed the mayor.

"Do it!" Case snarled, "or by the holy we'll string you up along with Arnston!"

Without another word he rammed home his spurs. The Deacon whirled after him, leaving the mayor staring in agonizing astonishment. A fierce exultation was flaming through Deacon Bottle. He wanted to finish this thing, get it over with.

THEY hit the first straggling buildings at a racing gallop, low in their saddles, guns out. Turning into a side street they pounded a block to the south and came out abruptly on the main drag. Two outlaw guards stationed at that end of the town opened fire on them, using saddles for gun rests. Case's mount stumbled and somersaulted, throwing the sheriff over its head. As Case rolled into the protection of the walk which jutted some six inches above the level of the street, Deacon Bottle's guns roared. One of the guards dropped with a bullet through his head. The other, gashed in the neck, raked his mount as he leaped for the off stirrup, and hanging by the horn behind the beast's shoulder, spurted for the town's center. Spooked by the unaccustomed manner of mounting, the animal pitched crazily, lost its footing and fell with the outlaw under him. The horse scrambled up again and with stirrups flying swerved between two sheds. The man lay huddled in the dust without moving. Sheriff Case staggered upright, his face streaked with dirt and blood.

Deacon Bottle slid out of the saddle. "Take this side of the street," he barked. "Play it safe or we'll be through before we start."

Running close in against the buildings on either side of the street, they bored into the town, the Deacon limping slightly from his leg wound and cramming fresh shells into his warm guns. Beyond them two hundred yards or more a pack of whooping riders were milling in front of the hardware store. The peaceful townsmen had been driven to cover, and save for the raiders the place

seemed deserted. Three men carrying a gunny-sack ran out of the hardware store and after shooting through the lock of the next place disappeared again.

In the seething uproar the gun battle at the opposite end of town had gone unnoticed or had been misinterpreted. The Deacon and Case closed in to within thirty yards of them before they were seen. One of the half dozen outlaws circling in the dusty roadway raised the cry then, and the gang wheeled toward them, guns beginning to flame.

Deacon Bottle saw then what use they were making of little Ted Case. The boy was in the midst of the group, bound to the saddle, with the halter of his mount tied to the horn of Lafe Arnston's saddle. Any bullets directed at the surging raiders would endanger him.

The Deacon's head jerked as a piercing cry echoed from across the street. Sheriff Case had discovered the same thing. As if that cry had come from his own throat, Deacon Bottle felt the shuddering hurt of it. Something snapped in him then. The coolness of his mind was blurred by a furious anger.

AFTERWARDS he remembered leaping out from the protection of the water barrel. From the tail of his eye he saw Case, running too. He saw the sheriff stagger as his body was shocked by some unseen force. Then a whining slug made the Deacon focus his attention ahead of him. He was holding his fire, waiting for the shot he wanted, praying that he would not be hit until he got it. It was sheer madness, that reckless dash into the open, but that thought did not even occur remotely to the Deacon. He stopped, the two silver-mounted sixguns jutting out past his ribs, the muscles of his smooth face corded into grimness. Then he got the shot. For an instant, through the weaving mass of horses and men, he got a clear lane to the boy's horse. His right hand weapon spurted flame, bucked. The animal on which little Ted Case was bound reared high, buckled, and crashed over on its side. The fall had probably broken the boy's leg, but he was out of danger now from bullets.

Lead tore at the Deacon's black frock coat, but his guns spouted on as fast as he could thumb the hammers. Lafe Arnston was cursing as he slashed with a knife at the halter rope of the dead horse still tied to his horn. Flailed by slugs, the raiders broke out of their swirling mass, spurring for cover.

One tumbled out of his saddle as they turned; another rode slumped forward, fingers tangled desperately in his bronc's mane. Then Case was down, sprawled on his belly with a smashed hip, his jaw set with pain. He was trying to jam new shells into an empty gun.

"Arnston!" the Deacon shouted. "Arnston!"

The knife of the outlaw leader stabbed through the rope. His mount snapped around as he slung his gun up, lowering beard-stubbled features contorted with fury. He only fired one shot, and that into the blue sky above the battle-ridden town, when Deacon Bottle's bullet struck him at the juncture of neck and chest, bowling him backward over the rump of his horse.

The three outlaws who had been looting the little saddle shop next to the hardware store, emerged at this moment. The Deacon's guns were empty. The three opened a raking fire at him as he flopped down, snatching hopelessly at the cartridges in his belt. He heard Case shoot twice over his head and then croak, "They're comin' back, damn 'em!"

It was true. Routed by that first blasting charge, the mounted raiders had taken heart at the arrival of reinforcements

from the store, and were closing in on that pit of hell in the street. Deacon Bottle could see them coming and he knew with a bitter certainty that he could not get his guns loaded in time to stop them.

Then he saw the oncoming raiders falter. Elsewhere in Antelope Springs a muffled din was rising. A cluster of horsemen catapulted into view at the further end of the street, and racing at their head, bellowing like a maniac, was the mayor Jake Marshal. Frightened into belated activity by Sheriff Case's threat on the outskirts, he had followed instructions to the letter.

Another party of townsmen swept into the opposite end of the street. They poured in twos and threes from between buildings, from side alleys, on foot through doorways flung suddenly open . . .

WHATEVER Sheriff Dode Case had been accused of—provable or otherwise—was forgotten in the glory of his atonement there in the main street of Antelope Springs. And his son, little Ted, whose knee had been badly wrenched but not broken, recovered swiftly and never tired of talking to his father of the scrap "we had."

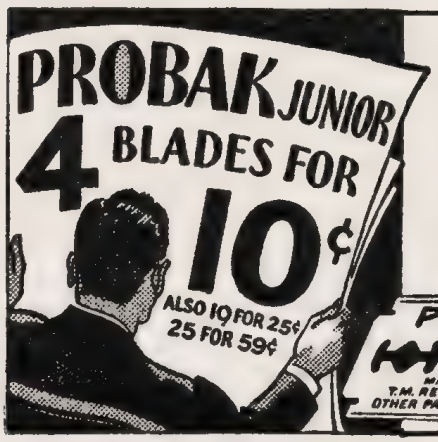
Deacon Bottle, on the verge of leaving Antelope Springs for Latigo, dropped in at the Case home where the sheriff was swearing wrathfully because a smashed hip laid a man up for a longer time than a broken rib.

"It's arranged," he told the Deacon. "The reward money for those gents we had corralled goes to settle for the damage the fight done to the town."

Deacon Bottle coughed, accepted thanks with embarrassment, promised to return, and at last murmured, "Oh, that gunnysack full of money them three fellers had, Case. I took care of that. Seen that the mayor got it." In his pocket one plump hand was encircling a roll of currency he had not had before that street battle. "Some gents will claim, most likely," he continued, "that there wasn't as much in it as they got robbed of. Be firm with 'em, Case. They're lucky to have *any* left." And the pious Deacon shook his head in solemn reproof of such questionable proceedings . . .

Deacon Bottle, that lovable old renegade servant of the Lord rides into a bad-luck streak in the coming issue of

STAR WESTERN



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By HARRY F. OLMSTED

The GUN-LAWYER

A hunted outcast from the law, shunned and feared by his own kind, the Gringo rode alone to a midnight rendezvous with the most deadly ruffians in all that wild, untamed Frontier. But awaiting him were things more fatal than either flashing steel or flaming guns—the dark weapons of treachery and deceit.

INTO the sunset's afterglow that bathed the barranca-notched rampart of the Muscubiabe came a half-score of riders to the rim. The weariness of hunted men showed starkly in their gaunted faces, in their lax saddle postures. And the restless curvetting of their mounts showed plainly that they were but

FROM TEXAS

A Novelette of California Outlawry

relays in the long ride undertaken by those who bestrode them.

El Lobo Prieto—the Black Wolf of the Sierra Madres—had led his men far and swiftly ahead of a hard-riding lawman posse that even now showed as a pluming dust cloud in the far notch of El Paso Cajon. Slender, pantherish, darkly dashing, this much-wanted outlaw sat aloof, his sullenly handsome face in grim repose, his dark eyes flashing along the backtrail toward that unshakable threat of the California Rangers.

The men of El Lobo, swart pistol-freighted *Californianos,* clustered in a group behind their leader. All but one who sat his horse a length nearer the rim. Like El Lobo, this one, too, was a man

apart—a gringo. The only gringo in all that lawless land. Tall, lithe, he rode straight in the stirrups, after the manner of the far *Tejanos*. A stony-faced, steel-eyed, silent man, he was known hardly better to his fellows than to the lawmen who chased them. At times this gringo had hinted vaguely at a boyhood spent in the wild salt grass of Texas, of gruelling trips up the cattle trails to Kansas, of lonely wanderings on far ranges. Anonimo, they called him—*Segundo Anonimo,* in full, meaning the nameless segundo. They knew him by no other designation, this strange, lonely-appearing man who was better than the best of them at anything. He was second in command.

As for the lawmen who harried this band, they, too, knew the gringo only as Segundo Anonimo, having had the name and a sketchy description of him from traitors to El Lobo. They, too, knew him for the brains that made El Lobo's savage sorties so uniformly successful. He was said to be as close as a brother to El Lobo, whose hate of all other gringos was already a legend in the Californias.

The leader now screwed in the saddle and let his dust-reddened eyes rest for a moment upon Anonimo.

"*Segundo mio,*" he called softly, "look you at this."

His slender index finger pointed toward the narrow road far below. The American spurred up beside him. Sitting their saddles there, they were very different, yet strangely alike. Both radiated the same wild lawlessness; both tall and slender and equally bronzed. But Anonimo patently possessed of the greater strength; while El Lobo was endowed with the hotter flame. Both were young enough to be reckless, and old enough to be tried and tempered.

Anonimo looked down into the pass. There, where the road wound west toward the distant Valle San Gabriel, a lone horseman cantered easily with a packed lead-horse kicking up dust behind him. A casual traveler, from the look of him, and as such of no interest. The fact that intrigued El Lobo was the presence of three horsemen, hidden from the traveler behind a huge clump of sumac.

Now those three put spurs to their ponies, surged out into the road before the traveler. Guns glinted in their hands. Their shrill commands lifting like whispers to the ears of the watchers on the rim. The traveler lifted his hands. From the hand of one of the trio bloomed a puff of smoke and the thunder of a shot woke the echoes. With no cry upon his lips, the traveler reeled, clutched vainly at the high horn of his saddle and fell into the dust.

A LASHING oath broke from the lips of El Anonimo and the dark face of the outlaw leader grew darker with the rush of hot blood. Even in lawless California, the wild ones had their codes. Wanton murder was taboo.

"*Attencion, mis bravos!* We ride!" El Lobo snapped the command. And when they had spurred up to him, he extended an index finger at the three road agents who were rifling the murdered traveler and ransacking his pack. "Yonder, my roosters, are those slinking *demonios, Los Tres Coyotes*—The Three Coyotes! It is not the first time they have pulled down the helpless to foul our trail with their ugly sign. Yonder job will be laid at our door, my little ones. Enough! Such vermin should die. Attend to it!"

Silently they hurled their horses down the narrow trail, hitting the flat at a high lope toward the Three Coyotes. When Anonimo would have ridden with them, El Lobo called him back.

"Let them have their fun, *compadre.* God knows they see little enough to exult

in. You and I—we will look to this hapless traveler."

And so, when the Three Coyotes had flung ahorse in a shower of bullets and had raced into the brush in a mad but futile attempt to escape, El Lobo and his sober-faced gringo lieutenant lit down beside the dead man.

He was young; as young as Anonimo, and similarly built. An *Americano* of breeding and means, to judge by appearances. On his smooth-shaven, finely-chiseled face was the same old smile with which he had faced the rigors of the desert that lay behind.

"A gringo!" murmured El Lobo, with the suggestion of a snarl. "Perhaps better off dead before he reaches our valley. He, at least, will never rob and cheat my *paisanos.* But even I, *compadre,* could hardly have wished for him to have died like this." He crossed himself. "A foul way to end, unshriven, and in cold blood."

"It is the way you will die, Lobo," answered Anonimo, reprovingly. "Just as I will."

El Lobo knelt beside the body, his broad shoulders shrugging. "We ride, my friend; we fight and we hope—only to die in the end. It is so with all men, and no cause for undue sorrow. I mourn, my friend, only because for such as me and you there can be no last sacrament. We will die too quickly."

From the scattered effects, he picked up a tooled leather wallet. It had been looted of money, but within it still reposed a crisp envelope. El Lobo read the inscription and an awed look swept his face. He withdrew the missive, stood up to read it. Then, his face strangely pale and his hand trembling, handed it to Anonimo. The American had never seen his chief so disturbed, so tragic. It embarrassed him unaccountably and he dropped his eyes to the letter. It read:

"Don Lucera Soledad,
Rancho Soledad,
San Gabriel, California.
Esteemed Friend:

Your kind invitation finds me in the hands of the medicos. They frown at even this weak expression. I am dying, Don Lucero, and will be unable to renew our old friendship. So I send you my son, Robert Thomas, a rising and capable lawyer. Trust him to find and employ any law there may be to deal with the gamblers who hold Domingo's I O U's. It is incredible that your son could have disgraced you by gambling away his heritage and then suiciding. I trust that the light of day may prove quite the contrary. I am proud to offer you the service of my only son, knowing his will be the gain in the association. Guide him and he will become a great lawyer in your rising land.

The medicos warn me and I must close. Accept from a dying hand this expression of friendship and of regret that this must be the inevitable

Adios.
John Thomas.

The one called Anonimo failed to look up when he had finished. His mind was racing along the rocky backtrail of his life. Judge John Thomas, of Laredo, Texas! What memories that name conjured up. Anonimo had been a stranger in Laredo when he had met John Thomas. A stranger . . . and in jail; broke and charged with a crime he hadn't committed. Without hope of reward, John Thomas had taken his case and had won it.

"Sometime," he had told the friendly old lawyer, "I'll make out to repay the debt." And now. . . .

El Lobo's quivering voice roused him from his reverie. "You know this Don Lucero Soledad?" he asked softly.

"No," answered the gringo lieutenant. "I know where the Rancho Soledad lies, but the *ranchero,* I have never seen him."

"I know him!" said the Latin, fiercely. "I know his family. I know the circumstances recited in the letter. What do you think of the statement of a gringo that a man's son has gambled away his estate

and then destroyed himself? Do you accept the word of a lying gringo?"

"All gringos aren't rascals," answered the Americano patiently. "I know one who is not." He tapped the letter. "This Judge Thomas, for instance."

"You know him?"

"Well enough to know he is a man. An honest man."

"I am forced to believe you," said El Lobo, bitterly. "But I have never met such a one. All that I know hold it a matter of pride to rob the poor, instead of the rich and arrogant as do I. Except—" he smiled and bowed, "except you, amigo. These gringos of California are robbing my countrymen and making laws to back up their theft. This Domingo Soledad now . . . how do we know they haven't done to him as they were about to do to me? You recall, *compadre?* The night we first met?"

ANONIMO nodded. Too well he remembered that night. He had swum his pony across the flood-angry Rio Los Angeles and was heading for one of the cantinas of the pueblo's Chino Alley. Two slinking shadows had materialized from a dark alleyway, carrying a still form between them, a form that suddenly struggled and cried weakly for help. A single shot by Anonimo had served to frighten that pair. They dropped their burden and fled.

That burden, a sadly wounded *Californiano,* was the one who afterwards became the notorious El Lobo. Anonimo had saved his life and thus was their friendship cemented. But despite their friendship, all Anonimo could ever learn from El Lobo concerning the affair was that he had played monte, that he had detected the gringo dealer cheating, that they had shot him down and were carrying his body to the river, the shifting sands of which had a way of effectively covering their grim secrets.

"Por Dios!" El Lobo straightened, cast his eyes toward that sweeping dust cloud of the Rangers. "We must ride again. And here come my faithful ones with their work well done. I will lead them away to safety, my rooster. And you—"

"I'll be right with you," finished the segundo.

"No, amigo. You will ride to the Rancho Soledad. You will enjoy Don Lucero's hospitality. You will help him in his trouble with these gringos, who are not all alike. You will cast off the nameless Anonimo to become Don Roberto Tomás—Robert Thomas, Esquire—the young lawyer of Laredo."

He pressed the wallet into Anonimo's hands. The segundo looked alarmed.

"That is a command, Captain?"

El Lobo smiled. "You are brave enough, my rooster, to refuse a command. But you are not hartless enough to refuse the call of friendship. I request it of you, my amigo."

"Bueno!" snapped Anonimo. "I am now Robert Thomas, son of Judge John Thomas of Laredo. Because you ask it, *Capitan.* And because I can thus repay an old debt."

Something of El Lobo's own fire illuminated his face as he made the decision. A decision, though he could never have suspected it, that was to shape California history.

Their men were roaring toward them. Anonimo matched El Lobo's move as he rose to the saddle. Their hands met.

"I will miss you, *Capitan!*"

"And I will miss you, my rooster," responded the outlaw. "But you must think no more of the Black Wolf. I win, but to lose in the end. I fight, but to die fighting. While you are unknown to the law except as. . . . Look you!"

He whipped off his segundo's high cone sombrero, leaned far over to drop it over the face of the dead. Handing Anonimo in its place the flat-crowned, chin-strapped hat of Robert Thomas. Then, on a sheet of paper from the dead lawyer's effects, he wrote two words, split the sheet and hung it upon a button of the dead man's coat.

"Look you!" he repeated again. And the young American read: *Anonimo—Traitor!*

"Anonimo is dead, *compadre,*" El Lobo said. "The destiny of Roberto Tomás is down yonder, not in an unmarked grave on a lonely trail in El Paso Cajon. You will become a great lawyer. . . ."

"But I know nothing of the law," protested Anonimo. "Except how to outrun it."

"There is a stronger law," insisted El Lobo, slapping his carved holsters. "One the gringos better understand. The unanswerable law of the *pistolas,* my friend."

"Gun-lawyer!" murmured the segundo. "I savvy."

The men came roaring up in a dust shower. El Lobo was already bawling orders.

"Andale, mis guereros! We ride, my warriors! Pedro, you will ride with your segundo as his *mozo.* Watch well after his welfare. The rest of you gather up the effects of this dead one. Pronto! There is little time!"

And so, from a knoll where the road pitched downward into the Valle Santa Ana, the one who had been Anonimo reined in and looked back. Far across the *monte* he saw the band of El Lobo scudding for the haven of the canyons of San Antonio. The American whipped off his hat, whirled it over his head, sent his farewell booming across the distance.

"Viva El Lobo!"

And on the faint breeze came the fateful answer: *"El Lobo . . . adios!"*

CHAPTER TWO

The Place of No Tomorrows

FROM the breast of a swelling *loma,* Don Roberto—as he was fated to be called for the rest of his life—drew rein with an exclamation. The wonder of this land never failed to stir him; never would. From the towering Sierra Madres, finger-like ridges pushed out to lose themselves in the verdant Valle San Gabriel. Water courses, tumbling out of the winter snow pack, filled the air with their brawling. Green ribbons of willow and cottonwood, of elderberry and wild grape, seemed to flutter out from the far, dark line of the river bosque like pennons in the westering breeze.

There were green pastures; fat horses and cattle, and the seductive shade of live oaks spread their arms to the sun. No wonder the *Californianos* felt a fierce hate for those who would despoil them of this land. For an instant, the tall American felt shame that he was of the same blood as those who, by trickery and guile, had already commenced to acquire the uncounted *leguas* of these ranches. Then he lost the feeling as it was borne upon him that, in a small way, he might fight the battle of the *rancheros.* At his side, the ubiquitous Pedro tossed a pudgy hand.

"There eet ees," he proclaimed, flaunting his pridefully-spoken Yankee patois. "El Rancho Soledad, *Captain!* A reech place, my frien'. There weel be mucho loot from thees place por us, no?"

"No loot," agreed his former segundo. "Ye come not here to loot but to be guests of Don Lucero. And see that you keep your sly fingers hobbled, sabe?"

"But, Señor Roberto, we—"

The one who had been Anonimo lifted a silencing hand, savoring that name. How strange it was going to sound! Yet, for the sake of the debt he owed old

Judge Thomas, he must wear it—and like it. Roberto—Bob Thomas. It was something to tie to, that name; something to be proud of. It opened to him, for the first time in his reckless, meaningless life, hope for the future, a bright spot on the horizon. He smiled.

"Come," he ordered this one who was indebted to him, at least once, for his life. "We ride to pay our respects to Don Lucero Soledad. And see that you bear yourself as a good servant should."

"Si señor," the little man doffed his huge hat. *"Bien.* That ess good. I weel tell thees so-worthless *vaqueros* w'at a hell of a feller my patron ees. And w'at a very *diablo* weeth the weemen!"

SHADOWS were long when the pair of them approached the big gates of Rancho Soledad. Down a lane bordered with red-berried pepper trees, came three *vaqueros* on the dead run, racing to be first to admit the strangers, the center and more reckless one a jump in the lead.

The vaqueros were at the gate when they arrived. The youngest and most reckless of the three on the ground, sweeping off a sombrero that betrayed black curls, cunningly tied up.

A laughing feminine voice called: "In the name of my father, Don Lucero Soledad, señores, I welcome you. We have been expecting you. Father will be desolated that he was away when you arrived."

It was a girl. A laughing-eyed scamp of a girl arrayed fetchingly in *charro* chaquete, *pantalones* and sash.

"Expecting us?" Bob echoed, arching his brows.

"Porque no?" she flung back, then recoiled in sudden panic. "But surely, it is that I am mistaken. You are not of the party of the great lawyer, Judge Thomas from—"

"Roberto Tomás," acknowledged Bob, hesitantly. "From Laredo."

From far down the lane, where rifts in the trees betrayed white plastered adobe and red tile of the Casa Soledad, came a shrill and searching call: "Juana-a-a-a! Juana-a-a-a!"

The girl started, flushing apologetically. "A thousand pardons, señor. It is that a girl is not supposed to ride her own horse in California, nor to listen to the song of the wind. And as for welcoming guests to the hacienda—" she wrinkled her nose. "My duenna calls. Adios!"

With unbelievable litheness, she flung herself ahorse, put him into a hard gallop toward the house, tossing her hand to a grizzled man who rode deliberately down the lane toward the gate.

"The mayordomo," Bob heard one of the vaqueros tell Pedro.

The mayordomo drew rein, lifted his hat. His dark eyes were fixed speculatively upon Bob. "You ride ahead of the Señor Tomás?" he asked.

"I am he," smiled the young American.

"Por Dios, señor! Forgive our miserable mistake. We had expected an older man."

"My father," explained Bob.

"Ah. He comes later perhaps?"

"He is past all riding," murmured the one who had been Anonimo. And because he felt real sorrow in the passing of a good friend, the gloom of his face transmitted to the mayordomo his true meaning.

"Ai, de mi," the old man mourned. "Don Lucero will be desolated to know it. He has counted greatly upon the advice of the *abogado,* the lawyer, your father, señor."

"I am sent in his place, and will do what I can," murmured Bob, bowing.

"Come!" the aged mayordomo wheeled his pony. "You have traveled far and must be weary. Such hospitality as our

unhappy house affords is yours, señor. Don Lucero should return from Los Angeles within the hour. Come!"

They cantered leisurely down the lane, the mayordomo scowlingly appraising this one he deemed too young for their pressing problem. His words betrayed his fears. "To help the Rancho Soledad," he ventured, "one will need to be well versed in the laws of the *Americanos,* señor. Laws, I am told, that are hard to get around."

"Ho, ho," Pedro broke into confident laughter. "In all of California, I bet you, there ees none so good at getting around thees law, my frien'. Not even thees El Lobo you *Californianos* boast of."

The mayordomo frowned at the pudgy rider. "We boast not of that *diablo,* señor. He and his *Yanque segundo* and their men are *malos hombres.* You both act wisely to ride so heavily armed. Here we are, Señor Tomás—the Rancho Soledad. Elfego, show the señor mozo to the servant's quarters. . . ."

"But *Capitan—"* protested Pedro to Bob, "ees eet not the best that I stay weeth you. W'at eef thees *El Lobo diablo* come, and I am not near to protect you?"

Bob laughed. "But the vaqueros, *compadre mio,"* he told the little boaster, "they, mayhap, will need your protection more. Go to them. They will welcome one with such bold tales of gun and skirt!"

HE LEFT Pedro staring after him, followed the mayordomo to quarters reserved for him. There he washed, brushed the dust from his clothes and stepped out into the vine-cooled *patio* and sank into a deep cowskin easy chair. A silent padding Indian servant fetched him wine and vanished without a word.

A mocking bird split its throat in a nearby tree. From one wing of the sprawling *casa* came the murmur of female voices and the enticing smells of cooking food. While from farther away came the excited shouts of men and the shrill screams of a wild bronco in the tried hands of the ranch *amansador.* There was something very welcome in the feel of this place to this one who had known only for so long the rigors of the trail. And, for what seemed a long time, he sat there.

His mind reverted to Juana, the daughter of Don Lucero. The beauty of her made his blood run stronger, and the vague unhappiness mirrored in her dark eyes stirred in him a gnawing uneasiness. He was here to allay that unhappiness. But how? He shook himself.

"Mañana," he murmured aloud. "Tomorrow I will go into this thing. Shake off the spell of this place and get down to business."

Behind him sounded a light footfall. He turned his eyes. Juana stood there. No longer the harum-scarum *charra* of the gate, but a glorious young woman in lace, with high, glittering comb in her ebon hair, with a colorful mantilla draped about her curving shoulders. Beautiful, she radiated an aura of tragedy. Just as El Lobo, thought Bob. How alike they were.

Even her low voice was like the outlaw chieftain's as she answered his audible musing: *"Mañana,* señor, is a word of yesterday. For the Soledads, I fear, this rancho is no more. It is a place of no tomorrows."

Unsmilingly, Bob motioned her to another chair. And while he rolled and smoked a cigarette, Juana Soledad unburdened herself of the pent-up bitterness of nightmare months. She told him nothing of the immediate trouble of the Soledads, but spoke rather of the great *ranchos* tributary to the Pueblo Los Angeles; grants made to the forebears of the Dons by the King of Spain. Verdant

empires of lush *potreros,* of countless horned cattle and fine horses were being broken up and passing from the hands of the *Californianos.* All to satisfy debts incurred by the victims of misplaced trust in a cruel and heartless race.

She spoke from her heart, her dark eyes flashing with the injustice of it, and Bob was profoundly moved. But when she paused for breath, he was spared an answer by the clatter of hoofbeats. Three riders clattered into the hacienda.

With a gasped "adios", Juana got up, gathered her skirts and hurried indoors. The three rivals dismounted, turned their ponies over to *estableros.* The older of the three led the way into the patio, his big spurs ringing. A tall, spare man with iron-gray hair, his olive skin marked him as a native *Californiano;* his courtly bearing and flashing black eyes told Bob that here was the Don of the rancho—Lucero Soledad. Behind him came two Americans. A tall, cadaverous, unsmiling man who shuffled big flat feet as he walked, and a blocky, confidently grinning man stepping with a quick, jerky stride.

Those two caused a change to take place in Bob's eyes. He knew them.

They were partners, gamblers both, proprietors of the Plaza Palace, a drinking and gaming dive of ill-repute on that festering sore of the Pueblo Los Angeles—Chino Alley. That they should be here rather startled the one who had been Anonimo. He had seen them often when in the pueblo before he had joined up with El Lobo and while questing for furtive relaxation afterward.

"Randall Potts an' Hayes Murcham!" he muttered to himself. "I wonder . . . if they are the ones?"

CHAPTER THREE

The Whip Hand

THROUGH a side gate came the aged mayordomo, murmuring the name "Roberto Tomás". Then the old Don was leaping forward to lay his hands on the young American's shoulders.

"Don Roberto!" he cried, delighted, "welcome to our poor house! The mayordomo has whispered to me about my dear old friend, your father. . . ."

Bob nodded, handed him the letter taken from the body in El Paso Cajon. Don Lucero read it, a bleak look overspreading his fine face, and his hand found Bob's, gripped it fervently.

"Your loss is mine, amigo," he murmured sadly. "It is a hard blow. The last of many in these hard days. Your pardon, Don Roberto; let me present my guests."

Turning, he introduced the gambler partners. The tall, slovenly one known as Randall Potts, offered a limp hand as he murmured a perfunctory, "Howdy!" Bob acknowledged the greeting with a nod.

For a brittle moment, the two men studied each other. Potts, according to the loose talk of the pueblo, was a killer, the more deadly because of his indolently peaceful pose. A gun bulged out the side of his dark coat, a gun reputed to have killed many men—always in self defense. Potts was a gambler who took no chances, either with his money or his life.

Hayes Murcham's grip was forceful, challenging. His gaze was direct. There was an air of pride about the man, expressed in a well-groomed appearance and a courteous manner. Mentally, Bob rated him the really dangerous one of the pair, and he was a little worried at the man's intent stare. Both of these had seen him among the crowds patronizing the Plaza Palace.

"Pleased to meetcha, Thomas," Murcham was saying. "An' glad you've showed. Don Lucero's bin promisin' that you'd git here, keepin' us twiddlin' our thumbs till you arrived. He thinks you

can make some difference to him in the little deal we've got on the fire."

Bob smiled thinly. "Mebby he's right," he chuckled. "I have hopes uh makin' some difference all around."

Something in his tone wiped the grin off Murcham's face. "Hope's is the cheapest things the' is, Thomas. But it takes money to buy *aguardiente* in Los Angeles. You say you're a lawyer? You don't look it, shore."

"Hell," said Bob, softly, "is full uh fellers that bet on looks."

"Sa-a-y!" The man still stared. "Ain't I seen you somewheres before?"

"I wouldn't wonder," drawled Bob, "Ever bin in jail in Laredo?"

Anger flamed in Murcham's eyes, but it was Potts who spoke. "That's it, Hayes. Laredo, when he was runnin' our game in the Texas Saloon. I knowed I'd seen him."

Don Lucero broke in. "Pardon, *caballeros.* It is nearly the *hora de comer*—the supper hour. If you will follow me, you may refresh yourselves."

Bowing to Bob, he led the gamblers into the house and the young American again sank into his easy chair. So it was these two! No finer pair of cut-throats could have been found in all Los Angeles to do business with. Suddenly the man who had been Segundo Anonimo was staggered with the burden of this thing he had undertaken.

He had come here at El Lobo's own suggestion, as a gun lawyer. And a job for a gun lawyer it now appeared to be. For the first time since leaving the outlaw band of the Black Wolf, the chore seemed distasteful—impossible. He wondered why, and the answer came to him at once: Juana, beautiful, alluring Juana. Already she had grown upon him more than he was willing to admit even to himself.

AS ANONIMO, as any stray traveler, he might have found welcome here, found also the courage to lay siege to her heart. But as Bob Thomas, the gun-lawyer—that was something else. And suddenly he envied the real Bob Thomas . . . and the armament of his legal learning. Anonimo had only the armament of his guns, and, he decided dourly, that he were better dead than to go to Juana with bloody hands. If he had even a smattering of the law he was posing as knowing, his hands need not necessarily be bloodied.

An insistent voice urged him to run, as he had run before, but the unfulfilled promise to old Judge Thomas held him there, frowning, nervous, until the two gamblers came from the *casa.*

"So you're gonna represent the Don?" purred Randall Potts, taking a chair facing Bob and folding his hands piously across his lank stomach. "You know anything about the business?"

Bob's cigarette winked twice before he answered. "There's two sides to every question," he parried. "Mayhap if you was to tell me yore side, it would help me settle this out uh court."

"Only reason we'd settle outa court," answered the cadaverous man, "would be tuh spare the feelin's of the old Don. We've got him where the hair's short. If he settles fer the full amount, we'll spare him the public disgrace of the trial. That's all."

"How much?" asked Bob.

"Two hundred thousand dollars. American dollars, not these 'dobe dollars."

"Two hundred thousand—" Bob echoed the vast sum unbelievingly. "For what?"

"Gamblin' debts," purred Hayes Murcham, with a little heat. "Secured by I O U's. The Don's boy played at our tables in the Plaza Palace. Went on a crazy bettin' spree. Me an' Randy tried tuh stop him, but he wouldn't lissen. Always

losin' an' writin' notes ag'in' the Rancho Soledad."

"Them notes don't bind the rancho," interrupted Bob. "Not for a lousy dollar."

Randall Potts smiled pityingly, twiddled his thumbs on his gaudy vest. "Mebby not," he murmured. "Our lawyer thinks it does. However, the boy committed suicide. An' men like the Don is mighty proud, Thomas. You'll need to talk fast an' fluent to persuade him tuh fight, if I know my *Californianos.*"

For moments Bob remained silent, mutely acknowledging what he already knew to be a fact. Pride had already ruined more than a few of the original *hacendados.* And that same unbending Latin pride would ruin more.

"You say Domingo Soledad killed himself," he drawled. "Where is your proof?"

Hayes Murcham snorted, tossed a jeweled hand. "Enough proof tuh carry weight. Two uh his *paisanos* saw him walk to the river. It was in flood. There was a shot. He disappeared. What do you think?"

"How long ago was this?"

"Two year ago. We've bin mighty patient with Soledad."

Two years! Eternal vigilance had honed Bob's mind to a razor edge. Thoughts chased his brain now with the crystal clarity of chain lightning. He was glad it had grown dark so the gamblers could not see the reflection of the idea that possessed him. It had been just about two years ago that he had dispersed the two *mozos* who had carried a weakly-crying body toward the Rio Los Angeles, from some dive in Chino Alley. Two years since he had first met the flame-like El Lobo, who in so many ways reminded him of the girl—Juana Soledad. The two things seemed to dovetail. . . .

"Two years is a long time tuh wait," Bob commented huskily. "A long time."

"We ain't buzzards," countered Randall Potts, piously. "We knowed how it broke the ol' man up. We didn't aim tuh crowd him."

"Nice of yuh," gritted Bob, in the grip of a deadly anger. "Two cheap tinhorns that trade on a man's honor tuh beat him outa his birthright. Two cheap tinhorns gettin' soft-hearted about a victim's feelin's. Why? What's the real reason for yore waitin'?"

Hayes Murcham's face went gray there in the gathering darkness. The gaunt right elbow of Randall Potts brushed aside the folds of his coat to bare the big gun hung at his hip. Death whispered from the shadows, but Murcham didn't call upon it. Of the pair, Hayes Murcham had the smoother tongue and the more swiftly calculating mind.

"That's kid stuff, Lawyer-man. Callin' us name won't get yuh no place. When we bring this action an' how long we wait is our business. But I don't mind tellin' yuh"—his voice took on an unctuous tone—"that Don Lucero's little gal has somethin' tuh do with our holdin' back our wolf. We understand that Don Romero Valesco, of Rancho Coyotes, has put in his oar there for his son, Arturo. Hayes Murcham don't aim tuh let that happen, nor he don't intend that the Señorita Juana Soledad shall ever know want because of what we do about these I O U's. You savvy what I mean, Thomas?"

A SOUL-SEARING hate poured through Bob. Hate of these human buzzards who were making laws to break the hearts of the *Californianos,* that they might gorge.

"You know the law Don Lucero will need," El Lobo had said at their parting. "The unanswerable law of the *pistolas.*"

How truly El Lobo had spoken when he said that the old *ranchero* would need gun

law. That was a law carried by such as these, to supplement the written statute prostituted to their greed. Only a gun-lawyer might successfully expound that law, and that was the part the one called Anonimo had practiced with deadly skill back yonder. Some time soon, some place other than in this quiet, orderly *casa,* he would meet these two in conference, to talk over the aspects of the law—smoky law.

Juana? A pang hit him. After that conference, he would be notorious. Either wanted, or dead. If still alive, he would ride to join El Lobo again. Juana would remain in his memory as something desirable that he had glimpsed but might never have, like a mirage to a thirsty desert traveler. He shook off the bitter mood, spoke to the two gamblers with no reflection of his emotion in his flat, dead voice.

"Don Lucero will not find it easy to raise so much money, gents. It might be impossible. If not, it will take a long time. Or is it land you want?"

Randall Potts drew his lank figure upward to stretch and yawn. "Too many uh these Dons is tryin' tuh sell off land tuh pay their debts," he said crassly. "It's a drug on the market. That's his worry, not ours—at least until the court gives us a judgment. Tell yuh what we will do, though. If Don Lucero wants it that way, we'll take the *casa* here an' a thousand *hectares* of land around it. An' credit the ol' boy with—ah—" his eyes flicked to his partner. "What yuh think's right, Hayes. Twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"That's fair," commented Murcham, jauntily. "If it includes house fixtures an' a thousand head uh mixed stock. The balance, one hundred an' seventy-five thousand, to be in cash. Yeah, I call that fair."

"Very fair," sneered Bob. "At that rate, it'll take all the rest of the Valle San Gabriel tuh pay the balance. How you figger the Don to raise it?"

He was burning up inside. Twenty-five thousand dollars for a tenth that many lush acres, including the great white *casa* and all the outbuildings. Yes, and including the priceless silver heirlooms of a long line of Soledads!

"We don't care how he raises it," chuckled Hayes Murcham, smugly. "He kin steal it as far as we care, eh, Randy? But we're forcin' his hand now. If he can't raise it, we'll be forced tuh take over the whole hacienda, much as we hate to do it."

The return of Don Lucero inviting them in to supper silenced Bob's acrid reply. Together they moved into the *casa,* the gamblers jauntily garrulous, the Don courteous and reserved. And behind them, Bob was pale with the consuming flame of a great rage.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun Lawyer's Fees

THAT supper in the wide, beam-ceilinged *comedor,* or dining room, was a silent, gloomy affair. Everyone present feeling the weight of the hard hand of fate. Alert servants moved noiselessly back and forth from the kitchen, fetching on the food and keeping the glasses filled with aged wines from the famed vineyards of San Jacinto and the Muscubiabe.

The two gamblers, warmed with overdraughts of the fortified wine, grew more and more garrulous, less and less careful of the courtesies. They monopolized the conversation, no one being able to concur in their lurid statements, no one caring to disagree. And Bob Thomas allowed his animosity a continually loosening rein.

Several times he caught the eyes of Juana upon him, and thrilled to the warm

fire of her glance and the hot flush of her cheek. He noted the swift change of those eyes when she looked toward the swaggering, maudlin gamblers. Again it was so like the change in the dark eyes of El Lobo, when his thoughts switched from some romantic dream to the grim dangers of the trail.

Once, Hayes Murcham had crassly inquired of the Don what his answer would be when the son of the house of Velasco made his bid for Juana. And when the troubled *hacendado* had rebuked him by saying that Juana was mistress of her own heart, Bob read the bleak clouding of the girl's face, then found her eyes warmly upon him. There was a mute query shining from them that was stronger than the spoken word. And to that question, with his heart turning over in his breast, Bob's eyes gave her a confident answer, but one he was sorry for a second afterward.

And so, when the meal was finished, when Juana and the frail Señora Soledad, her mother, had retired; when cigarettes were lighted and the last glasses drained, Don Lucero rose, faced the gamblers.

"Señores," he said graciously, "we will now repair to the patio to discuss our problem. I will throw the whole matter into the capable hands of my lawyer, the Señor Roberto Tomás. As he advises me, so will I do, my friends. Come, let us go outside."

The Don led the way, Bob bringing up the rear as before. And as he paused momentarily in the gloom of the arcade to relight his cigarette, his name was spoken from a darkened recess a few steps away. He moved to the spot. Juana stood beyond the grills of an aperture.

"*Mañana,* Roberto!" she whispered. "Tomorrow the sun will be warmer, the skies clearer."

"Why do you say that, Juana?" he murmured.

"I see it in your eyes, señor."

"I wish," he said guardedly, "that I was as sure of what I read in yours, señorita. You've changed your mind about there being no more tomorrows?"

"Until now," she answered fervently, "there was no hope. But now . . . . you are here, and tomorrow will come. And many *mañanas* afterward. I have faith, *Roberto mio.*"

He put out his hand to touch her, but she was gone.

For an instant he stood there, staring as if to pierce the veil of darkness. Then with a sigh, he turned to join the seated trio in the patio.

That brief talk had stirred him deeply. Too deeply. In her words, in her eyes, he read a thrilling promise that was answered in his heart and in his glance back there at the table. A promise he could never keep. From this moment, he must assume the business of a lawyer. Gun law was all he understood. And there could be no fee of sweetness for his service. The fees for the sort of lawyer he was could be no less than the hatred of society and the disillusionment of admirers. Killers may be useful; they are never adored.

Bob walked slowly to where three cigarettes glowed in the darkness and the low murmur of voices lifted. He took a seat there to listen to Don Lucero proudly acknowledge that the house of Soledad had always stood by its own, had always paid its debts, had ever been concerned first with its honor.

He lifted himself from his chair, his shoulders betraying a deadly inner weariness. "I am perplexed, my friends. I am weary and disturbed. You will pardon me if I retire and leave the matter in the hands of Señor Tomás? *Buenos noches.*"

He turned away. And it was some mo-

ments after he had vanished inside the *casa* before Hayes Murcham spoke. His voice was taunting: "We've gone all over this with him, an' he ain't got stomach fer no more. You savvy the lay an' the's no use coverin' the ground again. You got anything to say to us that's worth hearin'? If not . . . ."

"Two hundred thousand," broke in Bob, musingly. "A lot of money, gents. More'n you'll realize if you take the rancho an' try tuh peddle it. Two hundred thousand. I wonder how that amount would split three ways?"

IN the succeeding startled silence, they were probing the gloom, staring at him. Weighing those last words of one the old Don trusted with his fate. Randall Potts cleared his throat.

"Now yo're talkin' our lingo," he murmured approvingly. "What would you say tuh that, Hayes?"

"Agreeable," sighed Murcham. "Five per cent is regular. That's ten thousand off the full amount. For cash, only."

"Twenty," countered Bob, tonelessly.

"Fifteen!" The little gambler came back explosively. "An' not a cent more!"

"Not enough," protested Bob. "Not nearly enough for the amount involved."

"I might double the cut, personal," suggested Murcham, slyly, "if—you was to talk fast enough tuh Don Lucero's filly tuh make her see that I'm not such a bad feller; that I'd make her a better husband than some uh these lazy sons of *rancheros*. I've got looks an' money an' business sense. She can go heaps farther an' do a lot worse."

Bob grunted, stroked his jaws as if weighing the offer. "Fifteen thousand more fer that, eh? Well, a lawyer is trained tuh talk fast, gents. It's worth a try. If it can be did at all, tomorrow night will see the deal finished. Let us understand one another. I bring you one hundred an' seventy thousand dollars an' a gal's promise. What about that?"

"Better fetch her in with yuh," smirked Murcham, eagerly. "No use givin' a woman a chance tuh change her mind."

"Bring her with me," echoed Bob. "All right. Then I hand you the cash an' you turn over tuh me all the I O U's signed by Domingo Soledad. That right?"

"Satisfactory." Hayes Murcham's voice trembled with eagerness. "Tomorrow night then. At the Plaza Palace."

"Too conspicuous," objected the tall young American. "Make it somewhere half way between here an' there. Somewhere we can do business without bein' spied on."

"How about that ruined adobe *posada* in the San Gabriel narrows, at the point of the Los Coyotes Hills?" Randall Potts suggested. "You know the place, Murcham?"

"You mean the *casa espantosa*—the haunted house — of Rancho Potrero Grande?" asked his partner.

"The same. We will be there at ten tomorrow night, Thomas. Ready to deal. Don't disappoint us." And then he explained in detail, giving directions that Bob didn't need.

"I admire the old Don's choice of a lawyer," commented Hayes Murcham, drily. "An' bid you good night."

They clapped on their hats, left the patio, heading toward the stable and their mounts. Bob ground his cigarette under his toe, spat as if to rid his mouth of a bad taste and yawned.

"That's that," he said grimly to himself. He would ride to that rendezvous with death, carrying no money at all, with no yielding girl for Hayes Murcham's eager arms. With nothing at all to exchange for the I O U's of Domingo Soledad, except two ounces of hot lead—one for each of the gamblers. But those two words must have sounded deadly

to other ears that had strained for the last word of that conference. The ears of Juana Soledad!

A door flung open on the arcade. The girl stepped forth, her stride jerky with hate. Bob knew that she had heard, just by the stiffness of her, and he instantly realized how impotent would be any word of explanation.

'You dirty gringo dog!" she flung bitterly. "You are like all the rest . . . . only worse!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Black Wolf Snarls

THE young American stood with bowed head as Juana cycloned up to him. Bob didn't want to say a word, but it seemed almost as if he were obligated to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "But I can't explain. You'll have to take me on trust."

"Trust!" she said scornfully. "We took you on trust, Robert Thomas. Took you into our home in the belief that you were like your father, who was such a good friend to us, years ago in Pueblo Los Angeles. But I thank the Holy Virgin that I stooped to listen, that I found you out for the wolf that you are!"

She paused for breath. Bob opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. It was better this way, and would leave her with no torturing tender memories of him.

"You are the worst of all the ugly lot who despoil us!" she raged on. "*Por dios,* is there no honor in a gringo? Men like those despicable gamblers are honest and admirable before you! But we will learn to cheat and to steal and to trick the helpless, better than you *Americanos* know it. We will outdo you in your own sordid game, to hold what is ours. Yes, and we will learn to kill! Kill, you understand? I have now only to lift my voice to have you tied to the tail of a wild bronco and dragged to death. Or lashed to a pole and whipped with the quirt. . . ."

Her whole body was rigid, quivering with anger.

"Why don't you call them?" he asked, curiously. "Why don't you have me killed?"

"I—I—" the fire seemed to burn out of her. Her chin sank and her shoulders drooped. She seemed on the verge of tears. "I cannot," she bit out. "How can a Californian be as cruel as a gringo?"

Her lips were trembling and she put her hand up as if to stop them; a pitiful little gesture that wrung Bob's heart. Impulsively, he reached out, drew her to him. Her tear-dewed eyes widened to reflect the starlight. Then Bob was kissing her full lips. Not hungrily, not passionately, but with a fervent tenderness that was, to him at least, farewell. Adios.

He released her, stepped back. Juana caught her breath, flung her clenched hand to her mouth. Then she said with a deadly calm, "If you are on or near Rancho Soledad when the sun rises tomorrow, I will have you killed. Now go!"

Turning swiftly she flung herself into the *casa.* And Bob, standing rooted in his tracks, caught the softly terrible murmur of her convulsive weeping. Inside him, something seemed dead, missing. Gone now was his short-lived ambition to continue as Bob Thomas, into a clean and honest future following the law; paying his debts; facing his fellow men with no feeling of inferiority. Yes, those hopes were dead, and Juana had killed them. In their place was the old devil-may-care urge for gun-smoky trails and high adventure. All that was left was the desire to play out his string to its inevitable tragic finish.

But first, there was a job to do. He

shook himself together, strode from the patio, hitching his gunbelt as he went. Outside the door of the vaquero's quarters, he spoke Pedro's name. The little bandit clipped off one of his lurid recitals, beaming.

"You hear that, *mis bravos*?" he chortled. "Eet ees my *capitan.* No doubt there are more men to be killed than he can attend to . . . . singly. That ees where Pedro comes een. Or mayhap he weeshes to ask my judgment about some fair señorita. Ah . . . . w'at devils we are, *mi capitan* an' me. Adios."

He bowed himself outside, hugely pleased with himself. One eye fixed on Bob with an owlish wink. "I keel these *pobrecitos* weeth the tales of us, *amigo* —you an' Pedro. Who you want keeled now, my frien'?"

"You are God's own chosen liar, you rascal!" grinned Bob, wryly. "Throw saddles on our ponies. We ride."

"The short trip, *Capitan?* Then back to thees place?"

"For good, Pedro. Rancho Soledad is not for you and me. Come . . . . Hurry."

SADLY, the little outlaw turned toward the corrals. And Bob heard him mutter: "*Ai de mi!* Leave thees nice place weeth its good food, its red *vino,* its pleasant compadres! *Caracoles! El Capitan,* he mus' be dronk . . . . or *loco.*"

When he came grumbling back with their horses, he asked, "Why? *Porque?*"

"The señorita doesn't like my face, Pedro."

"Ho—that!" The little bandit snapped his fingers. "You do not onderstan', *Capitan.* Thees women they are ver' funny. When they love a man, they would test heem—send heem away, amigo. When the heart she get soft, the head she get hard. Some day, *Capitan,* you weel learn about the weemen from Pedro!"

They loped down the narrow lane to the road, turned west. Yonder, many miles away, lay the gaiety and the tragedy that was Pueblo Los Angeles. Northward was the roary head of sky-reaching San Antonio Mountain. Stars were winking out up there, shrouded behind a veil of clouds. And the one who had been Anonimo—who was now acknowledged by no other name—prayed for some cloud that could blot out the memories he was carrying from Rancho Soledad.

He screwed in the saddle, looked back, and his prayer was answered. The Casa Soledad loomed darkly in the starlight. A single light gleaming after them like the lone eye of some glaring Cyclops. Now a shadow rose up to be silhouetted against that light—the shadow of a man, cone-hatted and broad. Another shadow came tumbling across the light into the arms of the other. A girl into the arms of a man. And the girl was Juana! A moment later the shadows broke apart and the light was extinguished.

Bob squared in the saddle again, immune to the incessant prattling of Pedro. That thing he had witnessed back there in pantomine would go far to ease the pain of memories.

He spurred his pony, increased the pace. The rattle of their hoofbeats sounded loud in the night. The wind blew fresh, carrying with it a smell of drenched foliage. One by one the stars were obliterated. And then came the soft rain.

BOB and Pedro sought shelter that night in a ruined hovel close to the Rio San Gabriel, an inhospitable place fouled by cattle, but the partial roof permitted them the comfort of tiny fire.

Morning came and the two in the hovel made a frugal meal of jerked beef from

their saddle pockets. The day wore on and darkness came in a mournful swirl of storm wind and further rain flurries. Bob rose, fetched in his picketed horse, screwed down the saddle. Pedro roused, sat up to stare at him, his round face breaking into a contented grin.

"Hola, mi Capitan!" he said hoarsely. "We ride, eh? That ees good . . . ."

"*I* ride!" Bob corrected sternly. "You, my little one, stay here and wait for me to return. If I am not back in the dawn, you will ride again and join the Black Wolf. And forget the one you call Anonimo. You savvy?"

"Yo se!" murmured the chubby bandit, with a sudden damper on his ebullient spirit. "I understand, my frien'. And eet shall be as you say. But . . . . but I can never forget Anonimo, señor."

Bob smiled wanly. "Thanks for that, my plump little sausage. *Adios!*"

He stuck out his hand. Pedro gripped it, his eyes heavy with sorrow.

"Vaye con El Señor Dios—Go with God," he murmured huskily, and moved to the doorway of the hovel to watch his segundo ride away into the downpour.

CHAPTER SIX

Six-Gun Ghosts

CASA ESPANTOSA! Place of legends. Shunned at night by the credulous as the abode of restless, earth-bound spirits. Set fairly in the narrows of the Rio San Gabriel, this crumbling adobe was older than the oldest living inhabitant. And the tales it held within its silent walls, were the tales of the taming of a frontier.

Its adobe walls had sheltered Kit Carson and his Rocky Mountain men after their ignominious retreat from the Pueblo Los Angeles. The Pathfinder himself had found hospice there, as had more than one of California's governors. About its time-smoked fireplace, the pioneers of the conquest had gathered to recount the stirring anecdotes of their time.

The rustling cottonwoods seemed to have caught the romance of those voices, echoing them interminably in the soft, warm breezes. While the nearby Rio San Gabriel murmured fitfully of the tragedies that had transpired there. Behind the *fonda* lay a weed-grown burial spot marked by rotting headboards. Here, so the stories went, the ghosts of unshriven dead gathered to wail and mourn in the heart of the storm.

More than once had Anonimo found shelter in this lonely place with the harried band of El Lobo. He had found it good, not bad; its ghosts comforting, not haunting. Nor was he in any awe of its legends now as he tied his horse some distance from the ruin and walked leisurely toward it. A door creaked eerily on rusty hinges. A loose tile clattered like a ghost tapping in the wind. Water dripped soddenly from the eaves, whipped away the moaning wind.

The tall *Americano* walked in past the swaying door. From the crypt in the mud wall he reached down the stub of a candle, lighted it. Then, with its guttering flame casting weird shadows, he knelt at the fireplace to kindle a fire. Then came a phantom step behind him. A sepulchral voice. . . .

"It is true? You have come to this rendezvous of treachery?"

Bob came stiffly up, his hand hovering near his holster. His eyes sought out the sound. In a recessed portal to an adjoining room, a shadow moved. Bob's mind raced. That voice . . . . it was not that of Randall Potts; and was too deep-pitched for Hayes Murcham's.

"Who are you?" he asked, catching the glitter of a gun.

"To you," came the measured answer,

"I am Domingo Soledad, come here to prove my sister right, to find a Judas, who would sell my father out for a piece of silver. Careful, my rooster. It is more fitting that I kill you when you meet your gambler compadres upon their arrival. Your compadres who accept a note for a few hectares of land and from it manufacture the ransom of a king."

The man stepped into the candle light and the American gasped.

"El Lobo . . . !"

"El Lobo? What does he mean, Domingo?"

There was something more than fear in that feminine voice, and Juana Soledad stepped out of the gloom to stand beside her sternly staring brother who held so steady a gun. A brother who was now voicing a nervous little laugh.

"Señor," he murmured softly, "you have betrayed the house of Soledad. You have planted hope in the heart of my sister, then cut off the plant before it could bloom. By the memory of the mother who bore you, I ask that you spare her further hurt by making purposeless charges and bandying notorious names. You understand?"

"I understand," murmured Bob.

But what he couldn't understand was the enmity he read now in the dark eyes of his former chief. Why should El Lobo misunderstand? The fact that the outlaw chieftain was sparing him until the arrival of the gamblers, then apparently intending to slay all three, failed unduly to alarm him. Potts and Murcham would die—that was the important thing.

His own fate, he had lived with always. Swiftly he and El Lobo had sped along lawless trails, phantom horsemen riding out their span. They had lived each day fully in the knowledge that it might be their last, and disregarded fully the grinning fate at their cantles. Spurring recklessly toward the destiny from which there is no escape, the one who had been called Bob Thomas was steeled against this moment. But that death should be at El Lobo's hand . . . !

"I understand," he repeated. "And I am sorry about the mistake, señor. The light is uncertain. I took you for a friend. I see you are an enemy, hence not El Lobo."

Strange fires shot from the eyes of the bandit leader. But before he could frame a reply, a man stepped into the room. A small, chubby man whose huge hat dripped rain; whose rotund figure was deadly with belted guns and sheathed knife. It was Pedro.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, and his beady eyes fixed themselves admiringly upon the colorful figure of the Black Wolf. "*Mi jefe!* My chief! *Viva El Lobo! Mi Capitan* he tell Pedro to stay behind, but I remember your so-strict orders to watch over heem. So I follow, an' "—he thrust out his chest—"*por Dios,* here I am!"

THE blood drained from the face of the sad-eyed girl as her glance swept to her brother. "El Lobo!" she whispered. "Domingo! Then it is true; you are the *bandido?* And this man is the gringo!"

She swayed, put out her hand. El Lobo caught her as she fainted. His dark eyes flashed at the awed Pedro.

"May *El Señor Dios* forgive you, Pedro," he hissed softly, "if your blundering has killed her."

"Pray for your own soul, Lobo," snapped Bob. "It is you who have blundered. You sent me here as a gun-lawyer. I work in my own way. Because of your hate for all gringos, you mistrust me. You should not have come here. Least of all should you have brought Juana. Ride before it is too late; take her with you!"

"But you have betrayed the Soledads!" shot the Black Wolf.

"Por Dios!" exclaimed Pedro aghast. "Anonimo betray the Soledads? How, amigo? By coming here to keel those two diablos from Chino Alley?"

"Kill them?" repeated El Lobo, in an awed voice. "You came here to kill them, Anonimo? *Ai de mi!* How blind I have been! Blinded by my sister's sorrow! Forgive me, amigo, it is but another sign that without you I am but half a man. Forgive me. Now we are three against those buzzards."

"Take Juana out of this," said Bob.

El Lobo nodded, sheathed his weapon. "That is best. Come, Juana."

He led her toward the door, but the girl paused. "Go with God!" she whispered to Bob. "And when this is over, Señor Thomas, come to the rancho. Promise me that."

"I am a gringo, señorita."

"Thank God!" she murmured tearfully, "I know now that all gringos are not alike. Adios."

El Lobo flung his hand in farewell. Then he and the girl were framed in the doorway, limned against the guttering candle light. From outside came a sudden flurry of hoofbeats in the mud.

"By God, Randy, the fool fell fer it!" It was Hayes Murcham's exultant croak.

Stabbed by that voice, Bob leaped to the table to snuff the candle. But before that revealing flame went out, shots roared from the dripping shadows. From El Lobo lifted a dull groan of agony; from Juana a scream of terror. Black darkness gripped the *Casa Espantosa.* And Bob was leaping for the door, a clipped oath on his lips, his pistol palmed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Honor of a Don

OUTSIDE, Bob ran squarely into the turmoil of the storm and into stygian blackness that blinded him. That the treacherous gamblers had mistaken El Lobo for the lawyer they were supposed to meet, and had shot him, Bob felt certain. But where were the actors in this grim drama now?

Over the splashing rain came the jingle of saddle trappings through the darkness, and Bob headed toward it, bent in a deadly crouch. Behind him, he heard Pedro's spurs, as the little warrior moved out into battle.

Juana's voice was lifting in a tremulous paean of woe; *"Dios,* they have killed him! They have killed Domingo!"

Then the swift rush of horses; the scream of the girl and Hayes Murcham's gloating order.

"I've got her, Randy. An' the smart gent from Laredo is down. Le's go!"

Vengefully, Bob hurled himself toward them as they loomed, a black blot against the velvet curtain of night. A horse reared before him.

The crash of a gun resounded in his face, the lead licking close. His own weapon gave answer, and a rider tumbled, lay still. Pedro was in action, his gun spitting rhythmically. Then, in a swift drumming of hoofs, the horsemen were gone into the night.

"They are gone, *Capitan.* And here is El Lobo," Pedro's voice announced.

"Juana?" snapped Bob.

"Gone *Capitan.* They took her."

Bob swore, cupped at match to look at the one he had felled. He looked into the staring, sightless eyes of Randall Potts. Grunting with satisfacton, he darted to where the outlaw leader lay sprawled. He was wounded in the side, was unconscious but his heart still beat. Bob rose to listen to the vague murmur of receding hoofbeats.

"Pedro!" he commanded. "Take the *jefe* to the medico in San Gabriel. You know the one. Watch over him."

Then he was running for his horse. He

would be a good ten minutes behind Hayes Murcham and his Chino Alley Riders. And in the storm only a miracle could help him find them. His trail led to Los Angeles, across the swollen river, along muddy roads, and so to the heart of Hayes Murcham's vicious sway.

NIGHT life roared at flood tide in Chino Alley. Outside was cold wind, colder rain. Inside was the warmth of conviviality, the heat of passion, the false glow of alcohol and the seductive flame of treachery and deceit. Into that darkly splashing lane came a troop of wet riders who drew rein before the Plaza Palace and went inside. It is doubtful if more than one patron took note of the fact that Hayes Murcham half carried, half led a figure swathed in a heavy coat and *poncho*. But one did. A tall *Americano* whose face was drawn with weariness, who was wet to the skin, whose eyes were writhing pools of death—the greatly wanted Nameless segundo to El Lobo.

When the rear door of Murcham's quarters had closed behind that pair, the tall one drained his glass, strolled leisurely between the gambling tables, let himself into the room after Murcham. The gambler, stripping the wet wraps from the weakly sobbing girl, whirled as the invader turned the key and withdrew it. Fear showed starkly in every line of him.

"You?" he gruffed. "I thought—" The gambler's face was pallid. He recoiled from Bob's eyes.

"I'll stand the cost," he blurted out. "I'll meet yuh more'n half way. Randall got skeery out there an' opened up. Got killed, I reckon, which is no more'n he had comin'. Hell, I'll cut yuh in on this. Anything yuh say . . . ."

He stared appealingly at that awful figure flattened against the door.

"Domingo's notes?" whispered the tall *Americano*. "You got 'em?"

"Yes! Yes!" Murcham's arms were angled ludicrously away from his weapons.

"Where?"

The gambler pointed mutely to a small iron safe. On the bed, Juanta lifted herself to one elbow. Staring at Bob as if fascinated. The tall American jerked his head toward another door.

"See what that leads to, Juana!" he ordered. She swung open the portal of a clothes closet. "Step in there, señorita, and close it after you. I want to talk to this man alone.

She obeyed. Murcham licked dry lips. "What . . . . what are you goin' tuh do?"

"Get out the notes!"

The room was cold but Hayes Murcham's brow was beaded with sweat as he knelt beside the iron safe. It was the sweat of fear. Bold enough with his crooked card spreads, he was little more than a craven in a game where his life was at stake. The safe door creaked open. The man thrust his hand inside and Bob heard the rustle of papers. Then, with a spasmodic twist, Murcham withdrew a long-barreled gun, started swinging it about. With the deadly gun magic of the *Tejano* plainsmen, the Nameless Segundo drew and fired. He couldn't miss.

Murcham sagged, his gun tumbling. Then he sprawled convulsively, and lay very still. With a lithe bound, Bob was at the safe. Gathering the papers into a compact bundle, he tossed them onto the glowing coals on the hearth. Conscious of the tense silence that now gripped the barroom of the Plaza Palace. And Juana came from the closet to hurl herself into his arms.

Kicking out the pane of the single window, Bob handed her outside, followed her into the storm. Behind them lifted the cries of excited men, heavy pounding on the door. . . .

His arm supporting the girl, Bob raced down the dark lane into which water sluiced noisily from the flat roofs, until they came to some horses tethered at a rack. Quickly he picked out two leggy broncos, boosted Juana atop one, mounted the other.

Angry men burst from the rear of the Plaza Palace. Roaring hoofbeats mocked them. They wasted futile shots on targets they couldn't see, but no one noticed. Chino Alley was used to shots in the night, and to roaring hoofs.

And so, riding down the night, Bob and Juana came on reeling mounts into the courtyard of Rancho Soledad, the flutter of pursuit like a sinister promise behind them. Stiffly they swung down, moved across the patio to the door of the *casa.*

"I bid you adios, señorita," murmured the tall Americano. "I ride to find your brother to induce him to give up his lawless life, his futile fight against the gringo. Then . . . ." He stared off into the east, where the clouds were breaking in the promise of dawn.

"But you, Roberto," she answered softly, laying her hand upon his arm. "What of you? You heard my brother admit that without you, he was but half a man. And me. . . ."

"You?" he quried, tenderly.

"Without you, Roberto," she confessed, "I am desolated. Not even half a woman!"

"Querida!" he smiled as his arms went about her. *"Querida mia!"*

He turned toward the corrals just as a sweeping cavalcade rolled into the yard. Then Juana had him, was dragging him into the *casa.* There, in the great *sala,* Don Lucero stopped his restless pacing to stare.

"Niña!" he croaked brokenly and leaped for her. "My baby!"

"Padre mio!"

They clung to each other, sobbing. A knock rattled the door. Rain-soaked men, booted and spurred, surged into the house, led by one of the famed Los Angeles Rangers.

"Your pardon, señor," he muttered, doffing his hat. "Murder has been done in the Pueblo Los Angeles. We have followed the killer here." His eyes flicked to the tall American; he leveled his finger. "Who is this man?"

Before anyone could answer him, there was a rustle of movement among the Ranger's riders. They parted to permit the entrance of two men. And now the son of the house of Soledad stood before them. Reeling slightly as he clung to Pedro for support, a strangely white, yet dashingly erect El Lobo. His eyes met the starting ones of Don Lucero. The old Don took a step forward, crossing himself.

"Madre de Cristo!" he murmured piously. "My—"

The young Californian broke in upon his speech. "One moment, Don Lucero, before you betray me to the Ranger." He turned to face the officer. "I am the one you seek," he proclaimed, with a wan smile. "El Lobo, señor! At your service!"

"El Lobo!" Every voice in the room echoed the feared name.

"And this one?" asked the Ranger. "He is Anonimo, your lieutenant?"

"No!" almost screamed Juana. "No, no! He is Don Roberto Tomás, the great Texas lawyer from Laredo. Come here to assist my father."

"Very good!" The lawman nodded gravely, reached out to draw the silver inlaid guns from the outlaw's holsters. "You are my prisoner, Lobo."

The bandit smiled coldly, reeled. Bob leaped to his side, steadied him. "Why did you do it, amigo?" he murmured.

"No matter, Don Roberto," answered

the Black Wolf. "I go from here only to answer to the laws of *El Señor Dios.* Happy that the señorita—" he bowed to the convulsively sobbing girl, "and that the house of a friend is in the hands of a great lawyer. Gringo law is in California to stay. Gun law and the law of vengeance is dead. Gun-lawyer . . . adios! El Lobo . . . . adios!"

The breath went out from him like the flame from a dry wick. He went limp in the hands of his lieutenant. And only Juana saw Bob's lips form those prophetic words as he laid the body tenderly down.

"Anonimo . . . . adios!"

RANCHO Soledad was the last of the great haciendas to lose the air of tranquil security that had been theirs under the sway of the Dons. And why not? With the graciously beautiful Señora Juana Soledad de Thomas presiding over its social destinies; with Robert Thomas, one of California's most astute lawyers, watching the legal angles, the estate prospered.

Robert Thomas, renowned for his pleadings, might have gone far in politics. More than one governor of California sought and received his counsel. But he stuck by his practice and the clientele that leaned upon him, never asking more than a fair fee, never aspiring to the honor of position. Just as he had stuck to El Lobo—the Black Wolf of the Sierra Madres, as Segundo Anonimo, the Nameless Second-in-command.

To the end of his generous span, Pedro was mayordomo of Rancho Soledad. A chubby strutting little peacock of a man who would caress his fierce mustaches and proclaim: "Thees *capitan* of mine, he ees the very devil of a fellow, señores, weeth the law books, weeth the peestolas and . . . . ah . . . . weeth the weemen. *Seguro que si!*"

THE END

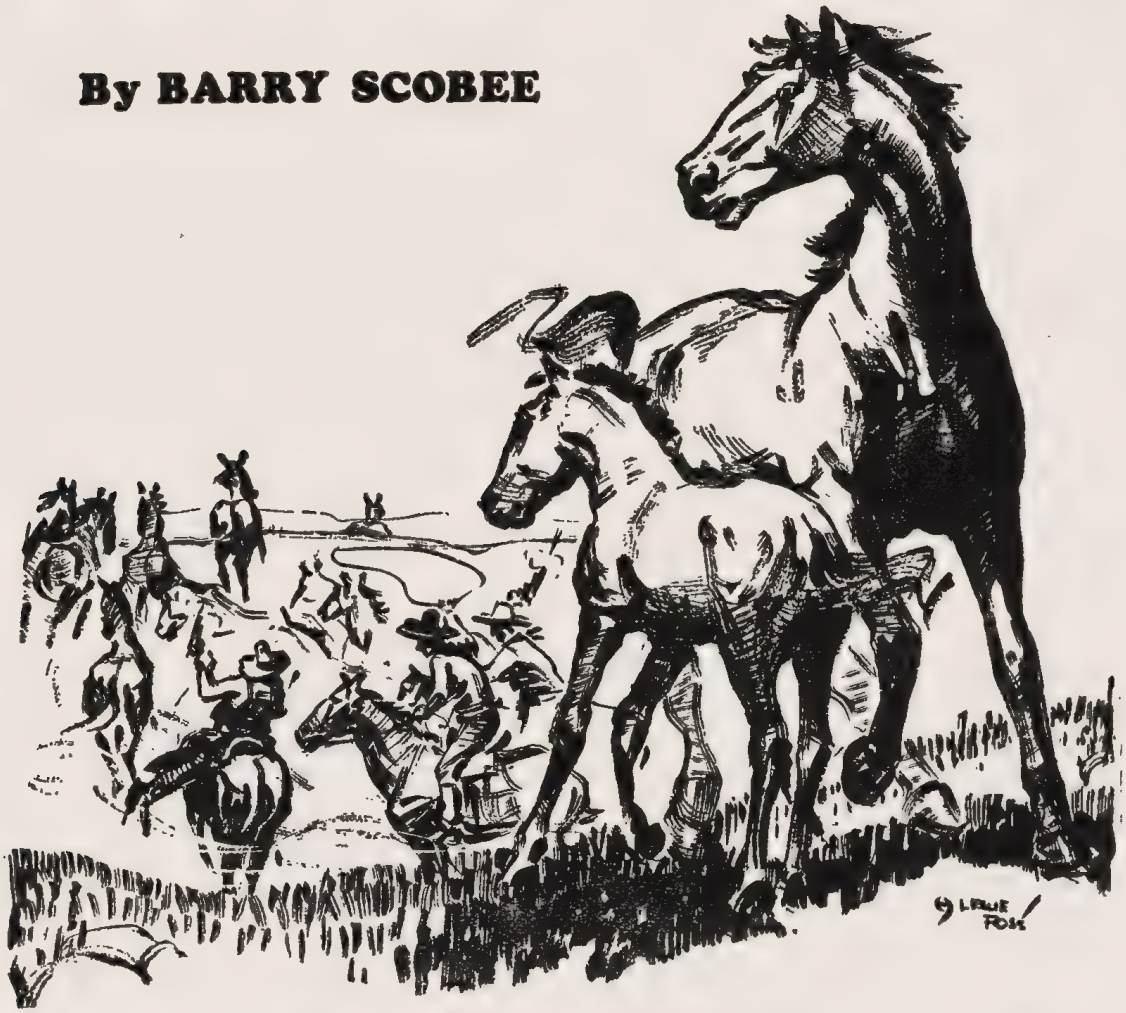
Next Month *July Issue*

Glamorous, Heart-gripping Novelettes by
CLIFF FARRELL, GUNNISON STEELE AND OTHERS!

Out June 5th!

OUTLAW COLT

By BARRY SCOBEE



A swinging noose, a white-hot branding iron and raking spurs were waiting for him, if for a single moment he relaxed his wildling vigilance! Here's the thrilling saga of a wild grulla colt—who pitted his cleverness and his courage against a hundred men.

THE little grulla colt was almost on his last legs. He had been dropped on rocky ground in the shank end of a dry, cold Southwestern April in the mountains, and had known nothing in his two weeks of life but rocky ground, steep hills, sharp winds, scanty mother's milk, and a never-ending effort to keep up with the wild horse herd.

Another day would just about attend to his case, but despite that, a law of his being made him pause now in his plodding, head-nodding, weary walk to sniff curiously at a green animal-like object squatting on the ground.

It was a big pin-cushion cactus. The pins, pointed outward, were a surprise and a pain. He shook his head, wrinkled his nose and stamped his tiny hoof in anger.

Then a querulous nicker came from higher up the slope, and like a weary child the little grulla remembered and went on, head bobbing low, making one more game effort to catch up with the wiry buckskin mare that was his mother, as she went

ahead, with the herd. All through the cold and dusty Spring, driven by every hungry fiber of their bodies, the wild bunch had been on the shove for grass and water.

Now the sorrel herd stallion, with a sudden lusty neigh, led his charges in an eager rush up and out of the brush and boulders to the brink of a high rim-rock. There, in the early morning sun and sharp west wind, their heads up and ears pointed, they flung swift and hungry glances far over the vast, rolling land that lay before them, in search of a tint of green or a glint of silver.

Their stopping gave the grulla his chance to catch up. With a little whimper of satisfaction he thrust his muzzle under his mother's crane-colored flank and pulled at the nipples. But all that he got was an answer to why colts leave home—a short squirt or two of lean milk, and then no more.

He withdrew and shook his head. His head dropped. His eyes filmed and closed. His lower lip sagged and twitched. His legs began to shake. The fatal despair that horseflesh is heir to in its last hours was sweeping him. His knees began to bend. He was yielding to a vast yearning to sink to the earth and let its dust and oblivion wean him from his suffering. . . .

Then some quick new thing stirred in the herd. An excitement; a hope. And something in the colt responded; perhaps no more than a sense of danger. His knees straightened. His head went up. He tautened, waiting to see which way the bunch would jump, so that he could avoid their hurtling bodies.

But the bunch did not leap and go. They were looking at something that he could not see. In abrupt, heedless colt curiosity, he shoved along his mother's ribs and thrust through the jamb of bodies to the brink of the rim cliff.

That which the troop was staring at, their nostrils spreading to catch any scent, held no significance for him—a ranch three or four miles away, and below were buildings, sheds, pens, a square of green that meant life to the starving mares, and some tiny white specks that were blocks of tongue-stinging salt.

An eager movement went over the mares. Instantly the big sorrel stallion, daddy of the grulla colt, leaped and squealed in warning, teeth bared, his hoofs fairly dancing.

Raids on ranches, the wild forays of the desperately hungry wild herd, might mean food and water, if the raids were successful. But they also meant danger—men and pens, ropes, guns, and death.

The stallion had a bullet-creased neck, still raw and sore. But three of the mares had young colts, another soon would have. Their instincts told them they must have food. The hunger urge was all at once bulging greater than their fear of the bully stallion.

The wiry little buckskin mother of the grulla was the first to make a break. She nosed her colt; saw that he was at the alert. Then with a squeal of defiance in the stallion's face she leaped past him.

The others followed in a flurry of dust, flying rocks, and rushing bodies. The stud came up in the rear, squalling and biting in a tempest of wrath at the yearling colts, a pair of fillies, and a spotted two-year-old male, that were following the mare's lead.

And the little grulla, neck stretched beside his mother, was heading out on his first raid.

THE two fillies were the first to become wary enough of the ranch to drop out of the wild stampede down the slopes. The Old Man of the Herd let them go. They were his daughters, and his instincts for herd preservation would soon compel him to drive them out anyhow.

The yearlings and other stuff dropped

out in ones and twos. But the stallion kept on with the mares until they reached the last shelf of the hills, where he managed to race ahead, turn back, and face them to a stop.

The stop was short-lived. The mares had lived in fenced pastures until the sorrel had stolen them away. They had been fed in corrals in time of snows. No great inhibitions kept them from the ranch, and with a splurge of dust and racket they raced on, leaving the stallion standing there, haremless.

Yet the mares had enough fear to be cautious. They halted, with their wheezing, trembling colts, two hundred yards from the pens.

One of the colts lay down in exhaustion, but the grulla kept his feet.

No men were visible about the pens, nor at the wide-spreading whitewashed adobe house beyond, under nogal and fresno trees. In the wind a wooden corral-gate swung open to and fro invitingly.

The mares toyed with the situation, racing toward the gate, racing back. Snorting, manes ruffed in the wind, pausing to lash the blocks of salt hungrily with their tongues, they wanted to enter the pens to hunt for feed, but were afraid to.

Then they got near enough to catch the sound of running water. It teased them into an ecstasy of desire. They crept forward, quite now, all eyes, all ears. The grulla caught the contagion. His little ears pricked up, he pushed close to his dam's side, little hoofs on the prance with excitement.

At last they were at the gate, easing through, starting at the slightest sound of rattling chain or creaking fence, rolling their eyes whitely at moveless shadows or swirls of dust.

The sound of water came from beyond the first fences. Another gate was hooked open. They went through. The water sound was still beyond. A third gate was conveniently ajar, and they passed it. And then they saw the water—a faucet pouring into a big circular cement trough.

They plunged their famished muzzles deep into the clear and sparkling fluid. Except the colt. He had never had a drink in his two weeks. His lips touched the water now by chance, and he jerked back, startled. He looked at the stuff. Touched it again experimentally. Shook his head and tried to push the moisture from his lips with his tongue, while he backed off, wrinkling his nose. But he saw that the other horses were drinking. He tried again, and this time he really got a taste. He was surprised; he tried more, and dabbled and drank a few baby swallows.

All at once—the colt had no warning at all—the six mares flung away from the trough and leaped for the gate, just as the gate banged shut and a voice shouted in triumph:

"We got 'em! I told yuh open gates and runnin' water was a trap that'd do the trick."

Two-legged things scrambled to the top rail of the fence, the first such creatures the grulla had seen. The wild mares rushed against the fence on the opposite side, making the whole pen shake.

"Yeah, but what you got when you git 'em?" said another.

"By gosh, we got a grulla colt. Looky there, Chuck, you been wantin' a grulla. There ye are, a comin' right into your pen like Sandy Claus! The usual Yoakum luck, by gosh!"

"Gad!" breathed the cowboy called Chuck, eyes gleaming, "he's a perfect crane color, a perfect grulla!"

"Well, that little buckskin is his mama. She's mighty nigh grulla herself."

"But not like the colt. Look at his markings. Ears shaded an exact black at the tips. Black mane, black tail. Black

line down his back. And look at his legs shading from crane on the shoulders and hips down to dark hocks and black hoofs. Boy! And see the black stripes on the upper forelegs!"

"That's the zebry in him, from away back yender."

"I don't know about that, but—"

Chuck's words faded. He just stood there on a middle rail of the fence, eyes shining like stars, aware of nothing in the world but the colt. The three men regarded him amusedly, and one asked curiously:

"Why'n heck, boss, you always wantin' a dern grulla? It's just a mixture of Spanish hoss blood, mustang, devil, and zebry."

Chuck Yoakum laughed. "Reckon you've said the reason—they're tough. And fighting mean too, I admit. Don't know about the zebra. But you give a grulla the right start and the proper training and I've got a hunch he'd make the finest cow horse and rodeo star that ever came over the range. Hang it, you know there are lots of 'em, and they do make good cow horses."

"Mebbyso, but they're tricky and onreliable."

"I'm going to drop the noose on this colt and see if he can take it. You boys hang back and let me handle him from the very first."

CHUCK YOAKUM threw a leg over the fence and shaped a loop. He dropped down into the pen with a thump of boot heels. The mares jammed into the farthest corner. The colts could not get into the jam, but pressed themselves against the bodies of the adults.

The first cast of Chuck's loop caught the colt about the neck. The mares scattered wildly. Chuck braced himself, rope bent around his hips. When the colt came to the end of the line he was thrown around, head toward Chuck. The little fellow jumped and reared and shook his head and bawled.

"Game little booger!" Chuck laughed affectionately.

The colt quit fighting the rope in a moment, and Chuck eased along, hand-overhand, until he was near enough to reach out and stroke the smoky silken neck. The little fellow squirmed and pulled and blew out his breath, but, held firmly, he finally quieted. Chuck's finger tips got to stroking behind his ears while Chuck talked softly: "Little fella. . . . Hungry. . . . Be good now. We won't hurt yuh."

When he held a lump of sugar—that he had put in his pocket for his own bay saddle stallion—under the colt's nose, the colt smelled, and nibbled, and took it. Then he asked for more with a perking of his ears.

"You little sun of a gun, you!" chuckled Chuck. "Hey, Winky, go get an aig from the henhouse. This little cuss is starved down—nothing but ribs and a head. Lord, what a grulla though!" He pronounced it *groo-ya* in the Mexican fashion, as all the men did. "What'll I name you, son? Grooya? Crane? High Flyin' Bird? Weather Bird? You're as smoky as a crane—or an Indian summer day down heah when you can see for a hundred miles. Smoky—now what's the matter with that for a name, Smoky Horse? Ease up easy, Winky, with yo' aig. Thanks."

Chuck cracked the egg on his teeth. Hand-heeled the colt's chin high in the air, and made him take the yolk and white.

"Only a little yalla run down my wrist," said Chuck. "He got most of it."

The colt tongued and swallowed, and again asked for more in colt language. Chuck substituted with another lump of sugar.

"Lucky break for you that we started

to brand the milk herd this morning," he said. "Pass in a hot iron, will you, Erl? I'm going to put my brand on this million-dollar fella. . . . Um, maybe, now, he's a bit hungry and frail to burn. . . . No, let me have it. I can't afford to take chances. If his mother get's away with him and goes back to the wild bunch, I can claim Smoky with my CY on him, wherever they roam."

With a movement so swift that the colt could not take alarm, Chuck bent and set his shoulder under the little grulla's neck, hooked his arms behind the forelegs, and heaved up and sidewise, throwing the colt neatly and with a soft *thump* on to the litter-padded ground.

Instantly the unexpected happened, before Winky could arrive with a branding iron. The buckskin mare turned. She rushed for Chuck, neck stretched, teeth bared, and hell in her eyes.

Chuck ducked as she sped past, nipping at him. She whirled back. Chuck struck her a hard blow across the nose with the heel of his hand. But she had two ends to fight with. She turned her heels, in swift and vicious lashing.

Chuck hit the ground and rolled, barely escaping her attack. The other three men had come catting over the high rail fence at the first squall of the little mare. They hit the ground now together, spurs, boots, two pairs of chaps, all blending together in a lot of noise to frighten the wild mares. And it frightened them. A ton and a half of horseflesh and bone hit the gate that had been latched behind them. There was a wrench and splinter of boards, then a whipping chain, and the gate flung open in a wreck.

"Watch out! Stop the colt!"

Four men went running and stooping, trying to snatch up the end of the rope that the colt was dragging from his neck.

"Hi-yi!" yipped Winky. "I got it!"

But the colt had the run on him. He took Winky in long strides. The other men snatched at the rope in vain. Winky went down, skating on his nose in the trash, the rope ripping through his burning fingers.

Then Chuck caught the rope in the last pen. The other gates had not been shut. The wild bunch flitted through to freedom.

The colt had Chuck on the run too. Chuck could not stop; he could not get a purchase for his feet. He whisked through the outer gate. He went climbing hand over hand on the rope. He got close to the bucking, bawling grulla youngster, and managed to get his knife out of a pocket and hold it in his teeth to open the blade.

"Hang on to 'im—we're_comin'!"

But before the men got there Chuck's knife had severed his new rope, close to the colt's neck, and the colt was free.

"Ruint a plumb good rope," rasped Winky, disgusted.

"Rather ruin the rope than the colt. Might have ruined him forever if we'd fought him to a standstill now—he's scared. And couldn't leave the rope on him, you know that. He might get clear away."

"Sure, I know. Dragging ropes wear sores, and sores kill animals."

"And I couldn't keep him without his mother. He'd probably starve, or get stunted. Well, let's don't stand here gaping. Get our horses. We'll head the wild bunch back. We'll get the colt's mother—the colt with her."

THE grulla colt pressed tight against his mother's side. She in turn pressed tight against the overhanging bank of the creek. Coarse, dry, wild grass and green stems of alfalfa hung over and helped further to conceal them from the approaching men, whose voices could be heard calling back and forth.

"It was certainly a vanishing act!" came Chuck Yoakum's voice. The men had stopped. "I'd have sworn she and her colt ran away with the bunch."

"Well," Winky was petulent, "we headed them off. She wa'ant there. Where'd she go? Devil pulled 'em down into the earth, looks like."

"They had to come here," said Chuck decisively. "They couldn't have got away anywhere else except right here in these ditches."

"We've combed the ditches."

"Let's thread 'em again. Follow down to the main arroyo. Ten bucks to the gazabo that brings back the colt. Twenty for the colt and mare. Alive and not dead, you hard-fried cow-busters."

"Hoppin' to it!"

A moment later the stepping of a horse sounded overhead, out of sight. The little mare, that had fought so valiantly for her offspring, began to tremble. But she did not move. The colt, feeling her tautness, trembled too.

The steps drew very close, then a horseman became visible above the slit of the ditch, against the clear sky. And still the mare held steadfast. It was a lesson in self-control; a lesson in hiding. A move, the faintest motion, would catch the tail of the man's eye. But the mare did not make that faintest telltale motion, nor did the imitative colt.

The man might, anyhow, have glanced down and seen them, but he was occupied at the moment in making the saddle gelding jump the narrow but deep ditch.

Then he was across, and it was with an expelling of held breath that the mare heard his horse's *chuck-a-luck chuck-a-luck* of diminishing hoofs.

The mare's trembling subsided, some of the wildness left her eyes, but her alertness continued, and she did not move from the overhang of the bank.

The sun climbed the sky and poured its golden liquid into the ditch. It burned the young colt's hide. He wrinkled it and wrinkled it, and finally shifted. The mare flung him back against her side.

Noon. The sun striding across the ditch; the smoky colt wrinkled his skin against the burning. The mother, in the shade, had become somnolent; her head drooped, her eyes closed. The colt, cunning as a child, eased off but instantly she nosed him back. The wild mare was hiding with the caution and patience of a deer, that lays up during the day.

In the late afternoon the mare finally moved. She ventured three or four steps to drink from a clear pool that seeped down from the irrigated fields. After that she cautiously reached up now and then and got a mouthful of the grass.

But it was dark when she finally found an exit and climbed out of the hiding place. She looked and listened, and watched the lighted window of the house for a long time, before she moved on to the green alfalfa field.

By daybreak she and the colt were back in the deep and narrow ditch. The alfalfa saved the grulla's life. His mother was giving more milk within a few hours, and the colt gained strength rapidly.

The mare grazed on the alfalfa three nights and hid in the ditch by day. But in the still forenoon of the fourth day two cowboys came riding across the fluted-work of the ditches, and one called out: "I smell hoss!"

"You got a good smeller—Say, look at that alfalfa, tramped and eat like a herd had been on it . . . Say, I'll bet yuh my next chicken drumstick that whole bunch of fuzzies is back here ridin' in the ditches and eatin' our alfalfer!"

They began riding across the deep water-cut slits again, up and down and back and forth. Again the buckskin mare and the grulla colt pressed close and still. But in a moment a yell came.

"There they are! There's the herd!"

"The grooya colt!"

THE mare broke instantly, seeing that the men's eyes were on her. She went racing up the ditch, the colt at her heels. The cowboys dashed after them, loops held out in their right hands, ready.

The ditch became shallower. Mare and colt rose rapidly above the surface. They lunged up over the low cut-bank at the head, running over the broken ground.

The riders began to twirl their loops. At that the mare did a curious thing. She slowed a little and with her nose thrust the colt on, so that it was running under her chin.

"You eddicated she-divil!" bawled one of the cowboys.

"She knows the meanin' of the rope!" bellowed the other. "Watch her!"

The man spurred forward, rope hissing in a circle. Then it darted out, straight for the colt. The rope would have necked it, but that the mare, rope-wise, with her muzzle, knocked it aside.

The act of saving her colt from capture cost her what none could have foreseen—with her head sidewise, casting away the loop, she stumbled and went down, turning in half a sommersault. Her body hurtled out in front of the rider who had thrown the rope. His horse stumbled over her and went staggering and then sprawling in a heap, flinging the rider two horse-lengths ahead.

The colt kept on, driven by fright and the instinct to escape. Once he glanced back. His mother was lying there, not moving.

When the grulla go away from the ditches and was starting up the slopes, he stopped and looked back. His mother still lay there, while one man was riding fast toward the pens and the other was limping along leading a saddle horse that was also lame. The little grulla fled on.

In a short time three riders were speeding toward him from the ranch pens. They gained on his tired legs. They grew in size; he could hear shouting from the men. Brush of the mountainous hillside started in farther on. He laid back his ears and headed for it.

He sensed the instant he was out of sight of the riders in the thick oak scrub. And there he stopped, dead weary.

The riders reached the brush, plunged into it on either side of him. One was so close that his outheld rope cast its shadow across the grulla down on the sun-mottled ground. They kept on, searching far up the slopes, this way and that. They paused to listen for the sound of footsteps, and then returned.

"Right here is where he entered the brush," said Chuck Yoakum.

The colt was so close he could see the eyes of the other men sharpen, could hear them breathe. But he did not move.

He held fast to the ground as he had held still that day with his dam. He scarcely breathed.

"He may be hid within fifty yards of us," said Chuck. And somehow the colt felt easier at the tones, sensed safety in them. "If we don't find him he'll starve to death."

They remounted, pushed into the brush again, close on both sides.

IN THE night the hungry little grulla returned to where he had last seen his mother. He nosed her cold form. Then he heard horse sounds at the corral. Chilled and hungry and lonely with his vigil he went easing along to the pens.

The horses paid him no heed. There were alien smells, strange sounds. Gates jiggling in the sharp west wind. . . .

With a little plaintive whinny, along toward daybreak, the grulla turned his

head in the direction he had seen the wild horse herd going when his cunning mother nosed him into the ditches.

Toward noon he found a fresh horse trail high above a cement cattle trough on the flats, where he had taken a few sups of water. He followed the scent up and up, through the mountain trees. It was his own wild bunch, in a grassy nest.

He ran to the nearest mare, thrust his nose in for milk. The mare sidled away. He persisted. She bit his hip a little, just to tell him that wasn't his lunch place. He went in again, starving. She kicked him sharply in the stomach and switched away. He went to another mare, and a third. But there was no affection. . . .

A degree of cunning came to him before the end of the day. Having tried this way and that, he at last eased in alongside another colt. Carefully he got hold of a nipple. The mare made no protest or movement. He sucked precious milk. The mare's own colt gave back a little, and Smoky made the best of his opportunity. The grulla had learned.

Day after day he did his raiding on the mare's udders, beside sucking colts. Altogether he got more milk than any other colt. Within a month he was the strongest colt in the bunch. Green grass had come, too, and he was a good feeder.

Now and then the wild horses would gaze down from some hidden, remote mountain height upon a ranch-spread far below. But no mare ever made a move to go down; and if men riding horses were seen coming up the slopes and appearing among the rimrocks, the horses would be well hidden by the big sorrel stallion before the men were within half a mile.

But always at sight of the ranches a strange feeling came to Smoky—a memory of a man's tender fingers gently scratching behind his ears and softly stealing along his neck; and of white things the man fed him. A sweet, lingering, desirable taste.

By November the grulla had got out of the habit of making raids on the mare's udders. He was a strong, wiry colt, a bit independent, inclined to loiter when the herd moved. The other colts had mothers to be anxious about them, but the grulla was watched out for only by the stallion when his majesty chanced to be near enough to rush in impatiently. The stallion would either half knock him over or give him a nip with his teeth that raised a welt and half lifted out a chunk of flesh.

Such incidents made the colt watchful of the stallion. But he would forget to keep with the herd. So that in late November he got lost entirely. There was a high wind and he could not pick up any scent or sound. For three days he played a lonely game of hunt the needle. He went a day without water, and another, then from a shelf of the high slopes he saw a ranch miles away, and a green grazing patch glinted in the western sun.

Smoky remembered, vaguely, the man's gentle voice, the sugar, the grazing that his mother found. Then, stung by his own thirst, he was meandering down the slopes before the sun set, eyes fastened on the beckoning ranch. He sensed that water could be found there, or perhaps a faint smell of moisture blew to him. . . .

No gate was conveniently open at the pens when he arrived in the cold night. There was no sound of running water, but he could smell water. And cows. He tried to make a round of the pens, but a long shed on one side cut him off; a wire fence on the other.

He found that by going near the house he was nearer to the water smell. But a three-wire fence kept him from going farther toward the smell. The top wire was too high for him to jump, and he could find no place to crawl under.

The wires, the posts, made him afraid of a trap too. He spent the latter part of the night walking back and forth along the fence or standing in an angle of the pens craning toward the water smell.

All at once, in the dusty winter morning, a square of light blocked out a window in the house, and there were man-sounds.

A door opened and a man came out. He squatted at a woodpile and filled a bent arm with sticks. Smoky stood very still in the shadows of the high rail fence of the corral. A man silhouetted in the light of the door called out:

"Pots, turn the windmill on, will you, as you come by?"

The man with the wood went out of his way and did something at the windmill. The wheel squeaked and groaned and began to whirl. In a moment, by the time the man closed the door behind his wood, water was running into an open trough and sloshing into a drinking trough somewhere in the corral.

Smoky was uneasy over the presence and sight of men. His horse sense told him to get a drink and go.

With a little whinny of abrupt determination he stepped from the shadows of the rail fence and wires. With a sudden rush he hurled himself forward, not over the top wire, for it was too high for him, but straight into the flimsy strands.

WIRES tautened and squeaked. The whole fence gave a wrenching sound. A post snapped off. But Smoky was through. He headed for the open guide trough where water gurgled, a shaggy, winter-haired, half-awkward colt.

Before he could reach the water and drink he heard the door open again, and immediately a man's voice cried out: "Gawd's sakes, something's busted inta the ya'd."

Men came piling out at once. Smoky tried to snatch two swallows. Then men were between him and the broken fence.

Smoky's rump backed into the corner of the corral fence and shed. His head up, watching these curious two-legged creatures.

"What is it, Frosty?"

"Um—" said the man who had told the cook to turn on the windmill, speaking slowly. "I don't know whether it's somethin' the coyotes has drug in er the makin's of a hoss."

"Looks like a grulla colt to me."

"A grulla?" the man asked sharply.

"Now looky here, Frosty Hilt," protested the cook, "you killed that other grulla breakin' him, and I said I'd take the next one we found rollin' up hill."

The man, Frosty Hilt, edged in, peering at the colt.

"Goddle-mighty," me muttered, mostly to himself. "It's a grulla or I'm a chicken hawk. Close in, men. Don't let him by. I want to see him, 'n' if he's got the perfect markings of a wild-eyed grulla and fightin' fool he's mine, see!"

Frosty laughed. His eyes were little and squinty and shrewd, and sharp as knives. His voice was somehow without the element of gentleness, and those eyes made the grulla colt's heart quake.

"Get in behind, under the shed, there, Wafer, and ease the colt over a jolt or two—yeh, that's it, wait now, whoa—"

Smoky had stepped out into clearer light, to avoid the man sneaking along under the shed.

"God!" said Frosty Hilt. "Look at it! Look at those markings. And a perfect crane color, or this light's a dam' liar. Look at the zebry stripes right under the shoulders. Goddle-mighty, he's got the markings of a simon-pure hellion. Hey, Fox, fetch a rope, and be quick about it. It this colt gets away somebody's feathers is going to burn."

Somebody climbed the fence with a

rope, tossed it to Frosty Hilt. He opened the coils and began to shape a hoop.

Smoky's fear, his blood, everything in him, leaped hotly. That rope! That thing had been on his neck once. Men had dragged on a rope about his neck. The thing had been flung at his mother.

Men with ropes!

A dozen men now, half dressed, frowzy-headed, stood in a quarter-circle between the corral fence and the shed, holding Smoky in for Frosty Hilt to loop him. Smoky reared and clawed the air a little, in defiance.

"Look at the devil! I christen him Satan right now. Boy, but ain't I got me a killer hoss! I'll ride him at the Pendleton and Cheyenne, 'fore thirty thousand people." The rope began to circle all at once for the throw.

Smoky went frantic with fear of the rope, but with greater fear of the man—of all the men. His glance whipped beyond them to the torn fence, then on to the high hills. His being suddenly ached to be away, galloping free again.

"Pots, go put a branding iron in the kitchen stove! I'm gonna stick my horseshoe brand on this little brute and make him mine forever."

Then Frosty sent the hurtling noose at Smoky. Smoky reared again. The hard loop failed to go over his head, but it struck him across the nose. It made a hollow, bony sound. It hurt. He shook his head as he came down on all fours.

Swiftly Frosty whisked a new loop into shape, and twirled it again.

Smoky danced.

"Goddle-mighty, what action!"

Smoky comprehended that there was but one way out, and that was through the wall of men.

"Watch out!" a cowboy shrilled.

Smoky ran back under the shed.

"Get him out!" bawled Hilt. "I can't rope him under there."

A man screamed at Smoky. The colt turned and leaped for the rail fence of the corral. He fell back.

Three ropes were whirling all at once. The frantic colt leaped this way and leaped that. Then all at once he was leaping square into the men, flinging himself sidewise into them. Frosty Hilt went down sprawling headlong.

"Oh what a scrapper!" he yelled even as he hit the dirt.

Smoky was through the wall of men. Free! He leaped for the flattened wire fence, a tremendous exultation in his heart. Then a thing tugged at his leg.

A rope from that yelping mob of cowboys was around his hoof, with half a dozen cowboys hanging to the rope.

"Get another'n on his neck! Get one on his forelegs!"

Another rope came hurling through the now clear light, straight for Smoky's head. And a mingled groan and yell of victory came from a dozen hoarse throats.

But Smoky's mind remembered something—it was in him, a part of him. That nose-thrust of his brave little buckskin mother's, when she warded the rope from him and gave her life for the act.

Smoky tossed up his nose again, and knocked the loop aside. What followed was almost too swift to register.

All at once he was kicking back, fighting with his heels, scattering men as they fell over each other's feet.

He kicked the rope off his heel. He felt when it let go. Then, with a squeal of wrath, and triumph, too, he leaped the fallen fence and was racing away.

Free! But with more than freedom. With a lesson in him that was to make him the boldest raider horse ever known among the ranches of the Southwest—the lesson that he could rush men off their feet, could escape men; that they were not so staunch as even a fence!

BADMAN FOR A DAY

By ART LAWSON
(Author of "Hangtree Bait," etc.)

On that beleaguered, war-torn range, most men would have sensed a trap in the blood-stained body beside the trail, and ridden on. But Jack Day, renegade, thought only of the debt that he owed the bushwhacked lawman, and that a reckoning must be made—a bitter, life-blood payment, sent through gunsmoke!

YOUNG JACK DAY rode lazily along in the sifting dust of the little herd—the small bunch of cows that he'd stolen from his ex-boss. It was a bright morning, and the sun, hardly yet above the hills, already shone warm against his side. The clearness of the morning and the movement of the horse

A Novelette of Gun-Bossed Ranges

made his body tingle with life. But there was bitterness in his heart.

Jack Day wasn't a professional rustler. In fact he had, until a few hours ago, been one of John Starr's top-hands, and just a couple of weeks past, he had come down the trail from delivering a big beef herd in Abiline.

Now Jack Day was cursing his ex-boss, the powerful rancher, John Starr. And generally he was using almost the identical words with which he had cursed the cattleman to his face a few hours before.

It had been a bitter fight back there in John Starr's great ranch-house, and it had come to its tragic ending when the old cattleman tried to laugh his trail-boss out of his grievance. And now the last act in the drama was being played out here in the rolling country beside the Pecos.

Jack Day had turned badman.

For revenge, partly. Out of anger, mostly. But also because he felt that he had been treated unjustly and, in his impetuous way, was taking what was his due. John Starr had given him merry

hell just when he could stand it the least.

On the way up to Abiline Jack Day had lost almost a hundred cows out of a herd of nearly two thousand. On his return to the Lone Star ranch old John had called for an accounting. Jack Day had tried to explain. There were still Indians in New Mexico Territory. The Llano Estacado over in Texas was overrun with rustlers. The trail from one end to the other was dotted with cattle thieves. Old John, Jack said, was damned lucky that he didn't lose more. If he'd only send along a decent-sized crew none of this would have happened.

But that was John Starr's touchy point. Back in the days just after the Civil War he had driven a herd of longhorns clean from Texas to the Territory without losing a single head. He was proud of that record and it was a record to be proud of. Now that his spread had prospered and his two-hundred head had multiplied into the thousands that grazed over five hundred square miles of that wide-open country, John Starr often looked back to his leaner, more rigorous days and held them before his men as an example of what he expected them to face and lick. He often expected them to do five men's work on one man's time. And when they failed, he told them about the time, "When I drove them longhorns all the way from . . ."

"But you weren't working for a tight old fool who sent you with five men and two thousand critters to Abiline," Jack Day had snapped back on that fateful night. "You weren't working for a gent who owned fifty-thousand cows and then griped about losing a hundred. Hell! there's that many rustled off you every week right here at home!"

"I don't doubt it," John Starr had come back. There was a twinkle in his old gray eyes, but Jack Day was too mad to see it. "It's a wonder to me there ain't twice that many stole," he had added, "when you think of the culls that I hire for cowboys."

"Culls?" John Day had gotten mighty mad at that. The days on the trail had rubbed his nerves raw. The reception at home had been too much for him. And coupled with both those facts was the chagrin of having lost any cows at all. "Well, here's one cull that ain't working any longer for the Lone Star!"

Jack Day bit off his final words. Then he turned abruptly and almost ran through the door.

ON the way to town and a good drunk he had flushed a stranger who was preparing to run off with twenty head of Lone Star cows. Jack drove the rustler into hasty flight, and then the thought occurred to him that he could take those few cows himself and partly even his score with old John Starr. Before he stopped to argue it out he found himself heading north, a queer flare of excitement burning within him, a score of John Starr's cows strung out ahead of him.

He remembered, from overheard barroom talk, a man called Blue Cassidy up near the Llano Estacado who would buy these cows and sell them to the government in the Indian Territory. He remembered the talk of the *vino* that rustler money could buy in Fort Sumner. . . .

Jack Day knew well enough that rustlers, when caught, were promptly hanged. But that bothered him little in the bright new dawn as he rode along the Pecos with his stolen cows. He still felt righteously angry at John Starr, but often his mind dwelt on that Mexican girl down in the cantina in Roswell. She had big black eyes, and a skin that was soft—and the wine that she held to your lips was warm and good. Then there was that gambling table in Lincoln where

the stakes were whatever you wanted to make them, and tinhorns and prospectors and the riders of the dark trails clicked blue chips and boasted of the money they had made or the quantities of liquor they had drunk.

All that instead of the lonely nights and the great empty sky and short-handed trail crews. No, Jack Day didn't even think of the crime he was committing, or the prospective hanging that dogged his trail far back beyond the horizon . . . And already his bitterness was fading a little . . .

Jack Day swung around a long bend in the river and then headed due north. He was a day and a half out now, safe from pursuit, he thought, and close to the end of the trail. He had spent all day yesterday in the hills a mile from a little park where he had left the cattle. Then, when night came, he drove on again under the bright stars. But the early morning sun was growing warmer and he knew that he must soon hunt for another spot to hole up. Ahead of him was a low range of hills, bright and blue in the first rays of the sun.

He jogged his horse into a slightly faster movement, urged on the lazy cow-brutes. And because he was tired of so much silence he broke into song, the meaningless refrain of *The Old Chisum Trail*:

> Come a tiyi yippi yi yo wy yay,
> Come a tiyi yippi yi yo-o-o-o . . .

The cows broke into a slow trot as Jack Day sung, and soon they topped the rise ahead. He pulled in his horse. Down below the Pecos wound endlessly south into Texas and the Rio. Ahead of him was the sparkling ribbon of a stream that came from the hills to the east and cut in a wide V to the Pecos. To the east were the wooded hills where he would sleep away the hours of sunlight far enough from his stolen cows so that he wouldn't be caught if they were trailed and found.

But down to the south . . . ? He raised in his stirrups, shading his eyes. Down there, where the Pecos glittered like molten silver, a faint dust cloud blossomed bright in the sunlight like a puff of rifle smoke. During the brief moment while he stood in the saddle and watched, the cloud grew rapidly larger, as if two or three riders were spurring their mounts on his trail.

Once Jack Day, himself, had ridden after a rustler who had run off a little bunch of Lone Star cows. He had ridden one of John Starr's best horses that day, and two other Lone Star men had been with him. No so very far away from where Jack Day stood now was the lonely grave of that rustler. He had made the fatal mistake of putting up a fight because he knew that John Starr's cows could not run as fast as John Starr's horses . . .

Jack Day thought quickly then, and acted quicker. Before the plan had even formulated in his mind he rowelled his horse into the little bunch of grazing cattle and started them running down the hill.

Off to the west, toward the Pecos, beyond the banks of the little stream, was a willow thicket. If he could get to it before the pursuers reached the top of the rise he would be comparatively safe. At least he could take a chance of hiding out there, and if they sighted him he could make a run for it and leave the cattle behind.

At the banks of the stream he snapped his quirt with a loud pop like the explosion of a six-gun. The longhorned brutes boogered, red-eyed and snorting, snapping through the low willows on the south side of the stream and sliding down

the slippery incline into the clear water of the creek.

Jack Day didn't even take the time to look where he was going. With one swift glance over his shoulders he plunged in after his stolen band. And as he hit the water he realized that he had not been one moment too soon, for up there on the top of the hill, the sun shone through a new dust-cloud that had raised almost before Jack Day's had settled.

The cattle flayed out with their hoofs, heading directly for the opposite bank. But Jack Day didn't want that. He churned ahead straight into the mass of milling cattle, and as he did so he glanced once again at the hill he had just left. Through the green tracery of the willows he saw a rider sitting his horse, silhouetted against the sky and there was another horse beyond the first.

It was too late then.

Jack Day leaned far over his horse's neck, whispered into his ear, scraped the animal's flanks with his spurs. But the horse, excited with the swimming and the clashing of the cattle's long, curving horns, smashed his wild hoofs into the cow directly behind him. A steer to the side snorted wildly, tossed his head high from the surface of the water. Jack Day saw it coming. But he couldn't move fast enough to get out of the way.

One of the steer's great horns snapped down like a scimitar. It took Jack Day across the side of his head. And the day that had been bright with new dawn grew blacker than the stormiest night . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Renegade's Debt

THE sun hurt Jack Day's eyes when he came to lying there on the sandbar. He blinked trying to remember what had happened, and he felt very miserable. The side of his head throbbed violently. He felt as if heavy waves were washing over his chest. And then he sneezed violently. The sneeze sent a myriad of sparks hurtling through his head—but it lessened the wave that washed over his chest. And when he opened his eyes he could see what was about him.

A lean-faced gent with a gray curving mustache leaned over him. The stranger had gray eyes, too, and they were bright and clean as burnished steel. Jack Day had never seen this man before. He was not one of John Starr's punchers.

"You got me," Jack said. "Danged if you didn't!"

He tried to sit up, but the gray-eyed gent pushed him back down on the sand again.

"Take 'er easy, pardner," the stranger said soothingly. "You took on a lot of water. You was damned near gone when I fished you out. If I hadn't of seen yore horse kiotin' up out of the creek I never would of known you were down there. That cayuse went runnin' off towards the Pecos . . . "

The man talked on, while Jack Day's brain slowed in its whirling and his vision cleared. But Jack couldn't follow the words very well and he was too obsessed with the thought that he had been captured to care much about his horse. When the stranger hesitated for a moment Jack cut in with a raspy, water-soaked voice:

"Which is just my needin's, I guess. I shouldn't of done it. You can't beat the game. Many a time I've heard old John say that."

"You shouldn't of done what?" The stranger's steel-gray eyes flickered. "You one of old John's punchers?"

"Was!" Jack Day tried to sit up again and the stranger helped him this time. It seemed to steady Jack's nerves, somehow.

"That's better," the stranger smiled

beneath his big mustache. "You'll be right as a trivet in another minute. Old John always did hire on tough hombres. He always said that bullets wouldn't kill his men and water wouldn't drown them. But he always did go short-handed—always was the kind of gent who'd send a feller out alone to herd a bunch of cows along the trail. If John would hire a couple of more men he'd lose a lot less cows to those Pecos gunies. But you can't tell him that. He and his wife brought in a herd of two hundred all the way from the Big Bend, he says. Hell!"

"Hell is right," Jack Day agreed, wondering vaguely if the stranger really was just pulling his leg. The stranger suddenly stood up and began shaking the damp sand from his levis.

"I gotta be headin' on," the gray-eyed man said. "But first I'll see if I can find that hawss of yores. You'll need it. And I got a bottle in my saddle pockets that will help you get over that bang on your sconce."

Jack watched amazedly while the stranger fetched a pint of Old Crow and passed it down to him. He took a drink, and the liquor warmed his stomach. Then the stranger took a drink, too, and slid into his saddle to go out and look for Jack's horse. When he came back with the run-away Jack was standing up, wobbly, but whole.

"I'd like to help you drive this herd, pardner." The stranger's gray eyes still shone, and in them was nothing but honesty. "But I gotta hurry. Be seein' yuh one of these days."

Jack took the stranger's hand, shook it solemnly. He tried to say thanks, or something. But before he could get out a word the gray man whirled his horse, plunged up the sandbar and through the thicket. Jack watched him go, watched him pick up a pack-horse that had been staked on the flat ground, and then watched him vanish in his dust-cloud towards the north . . .

IN the bright dawn of a new day Jack Day was finding it a little more difficult to be a good rustler. Somehow stealing old John Starr's cows didn't seem to be so much fun any longer. Somehow the nights of promise in Roswell and Fort Sumner no longer glittered with their flashing array of white teeth and dark eyes and soft skin. The words of the stranger had gone deep into Jack Day's mind, and the parting hand-clasp still burned Jack's palm.

But he had set out to steal some cows and have a big time on the proceeds. And Jack Day was damned if he'd ever quit anything that he had once started. Still, the Lone Star brand burned deep in the flanks of the little bunch of cow-critters strung out ahead of Jack Day seemed to loom bigger and bigger and as the puncher chased them along beneath the high bluffs that led to Blue Cassidy's, he wished that he had stolen somebody else's cows!

He tried to sing as he rode along in the rosy dawn. But the words mocked him and the sounds hurt his throbbing head. He tried to talk to his horse as the animal picked its way beneath the overhanging rim-rock and ledges—and the horse just waggled its ears and made no answer.

So it was that Jack Day rode almost on top of the still, dark form spread-eagled in the trail before he saw it. Even then he might have gone by if one of his steers hadn't stopped to sniff, and suddenly gone wild and started to run, bellowing madly down the trail, with the others following in furious, miniature stampede. That movement snapped Jack Day out of his lethargy.

He slid out of the saddle, kneeled down and turned the prone man over to his

back. He gasped, swore softly to himself, then leaned close to listen to the man's heart-beat. The stranger—the same walrus-mustached man who had pulled Jack Day out of the shining stream—was still alive. But that heart of his was beating with amazing feebleness. A single bullet had gone through his back, cut a lung, and almost killed him.

Jack Day forgot his stolen cattle as he worked rapidly, forlornly, over the supine man. He bandaged the place in the back where the bullet had entered. He plugged the great hole in the front where the spread slug had come out. And he listened again for the stranger's heart-beat, wondering if it could possibly go on any longer. The gray man, Jack figured, had been shot only an hour or so ago. He had been left there to die where the coyotes and the buzzards must eventually find him.

And when Jack Day had completed the rough job of frontier first-aid, despairing that he could bring the man back to life, something glittering in the sun drew his attention. In working, Jack had opened the man's cowhide vest. He hadn't noticed the badge pinned to the inside of the garment.

The gold shield of a U. S. marshal shone brightly in the early sun and flashed sharply in the gray eyes of the wandering cowpuncher. It set Jack Day to puzzling; wondering what a marshal was doing up there in that remote country which lawmen usually avoided; trying to figure out why the marshal had fished him out of the river the day before and then ridden on without molesting him, when it was perfectly obvious that he was stealing some of John Starr's cattle. He couldn't find the answers.

The man's heart was pounding stronger. Hot anger burned through Jack Day as he looked down on the old marshal. He wanted to do something more for him. A little bunch of cows grazing down near the river provided a suggestion. Where there are cattle there are generally people. So he slid into his saddle again and rode quickly up a short rise ahead to see what he could find. Down there by the Pecos he spotted a grove of cottonwoods, and above them hung a thin, mist-like cloud of smoke. And that bright flash along the river bank to the left would be sun-light on a wire corral.

He loped back down the rise, dismounted again, and examined the wounded man. The marshal was still holding out, gaining strength very slowly. Jack Day frowned. He had seen men wounded like this who had recovered.

Carefully he picked up the marshal and held the big man in his arms like a baby. Jack Day was a powerful man, but mounting his skittery horse was a job he almost failed at. Finally he was in the saddle and his horse was walking slowly towards the clump of cottonwoods.

The movement opened up the marshal's vest even wider. The shield flashed again in the sun. And a curiosity which Jack had not had time for slowly began coming over him. He leaned over the wounded man, lifted the corner of the shield with one finger.

What he read made him gasp so loud the horse's ears flashed back. Engraved in the metal were several words that blurred before Jack Day's eyes. But two words stood out: *"Tom Starr."*

Old John's brother, who had not left Texas that time so long ago when John headed across the Pecos to found his fortune. . . .

THAT ranch-house in the cottonwoods was surrounded by a heavy barbed wire fence. Jack Day stopped his horse by the gate and hollered. A moment later a young woman came out of the battened door and stood just before the split-log

shack holding a rifle in her hands. She was all of fifty feet away from the gate and in the shadow of the trees. But even at that distance Jack Day could tell that she was young; that her features reflected the beauty of that rolling, grassy country —and he sensed the look of fighting determination on her face as she waited there, holding the gun.

"My pardner's wounded," Jack told her. "How about opening up and letting us in."

The girl stepped forward a couple of paces. Then she stopped again.

"Is this another of Blue Cassidy's tricks?" she asked, her voice ringing clear through the morning shadows. "If it is, you'd better fog off before I let go a couple of high-power shots."

"Thanks," Jack grinned sardonically. "My partner's dying. Let's get over the monkey business and worry about tricks later."

The girl stiffened where she stood. Then very slowly she walked forward, still holding the rifle before her, until she was just beyond the gate. For a moment she stared up through the wire at Jack Day, at the big gray-haired man he still held in his arms. Suspicion still showed in her wide blue eyes. Then suddenly she tossed her golden head and unlocked the gate.

As Jack Day rode through she held the rifle in one hand and closed the gate after him. She walked beside him to the house and before he had a chance to dismount she slipped both his Colts from his holsters and said: "If this is a trick don't forget that I've got this rifle pointed at your back."

"That seems to be the custom of this country," Jack said as he slipped down from the saddle. "But why warn me? They didn't warn my pardner!"

The girl flushed at that. It made her very beautiful; so beautiful that Jack's natural antagonism towards women and his anger towards this girl in particular didn't even hide that fact from him. It seemed to suddenly leave him strangely hollow inside.

"Where can I put him?" Jack asked abruptly.

The girl let the rifle sag. She pushed open the battened door and led the way in. She indicated a bunk in the corner of the one main room, but said nothing to the cowboy. Very tenderly Jack laid the marshal down. Very carefully he listened again for the man's heartbeat, and a thin smile flitted over his handsome face.

"You can forget that rifle of yours for a minute," he said, turning to the girl, "and boil up some water. If you're going to shoot me, do it later, but there's more important business right now."

The girl opened her mouth as if to say something, then apparently thought better of it. She turned towards a low door that opened into the lean-to kitchen at the back of the house. Jack Day heard the kettle scrape across the stove-top, heard the girl furiously shoving wood into the fire-box. A sudden determination swept over him—a quick decision whose consequences he did not even think of at the time.

His back was to the door. He bent swiftly, unclasped the gold shield from the marshal's vest and slipped it into his chaps. He found some papers in Tom Starr's inside vest pocket and he took those, too. Then he straightened as the girl's heels clicked again.

"I've got some cloths that are better than those bandannas you're using for bandages," she said.

Jack Day turned to look at her. There was a queer light in her blue eyes now, a strange quirk to her full lips.

"You're very kind," he said stiffly.

Working together, they replaced the reddened bandannas with clean cloths. They avoided looking at each other as they worked, and spoke only in monosyllables.

"I'm going to town to get a doctor," Jack said when they were finished. "You watch my pardner while I'm gone."

"He's not likely to get up and leave," the girl came back.

"He ain't," Jack admitted. His lips turned slightly in a smile. The color slowly became normal again on his cheekbones. But his heart was pounding so furiously he wondered if it actually caused his chest to move. "But maybeso he'll be delirious," Jack went on. "He gets queer ideas when the fever hits him. Thinks he's chasing rustlers. He might try to get away. But don't let him."

"I won't," the girl said. There was a puzzled frown on her lovely face as if she didn't quite understand this banter. "I suppose he'll think I'm one of them."

"Probably," Jack Day said. "But try to smile at him—if you know how. I bet he'll forget his troubles and want to stay on here forever."

The girl flushed a deeper crimson then than ever before. Her lower lip trembled. Her blue eyes could no longer hold to his. She glanced away and when she looked up again he was starting out the doorway. She took one step forward, stopped abruptly, then ran out to unlock the gate for him.

He rode off at a fast lope without once looking back at the golden-haired girl who stood by the barbed wire watching him go. That badge weighed heavily in his chaps' pocket. Tom Starr had saved his life the day before while he was stealing Tom's brother's cows. Maybe he had evened that score already by bringing Tom in. He didn't know. Tom might yet die.

But in that brief moment in the ranchhouse Jack Day suddenly decided that Tom Starr's badge would ride on, even though the lawman took the last long trail without it. Jack Day was going to find the bushwhackers who had dry-gulched the marshal. He owed Tom Starr a debt that was bigger than his life. Somehow, he figured, Tom's badge would help him pay off.

CHAPTER THREE

Boot Hill Doctor

THE sun was hot; the light wind was blowing up dust-devils in the road as Jack Day loped into the little cross-roads hell that was called Cassidy's Crossing. The two sides of the street below the high gray bluffs were lined almost solid with small, false-fronted saloons and stores. The adobe jail, looking a though it was rotting from neglect, was an open welcome to the worst thieves and rottonest killers of the whole Pecos country. Old Doc Bone's Mortuary Palace, half-hidden between the Silver Palace honkatonk and the Infierno pulque dive, was a warning to wandering lawmen.

Jack Day smiled grimly as he read the crudely-painted legend on the wall of the undertaker's shack:

Law-dogs Our Specialty
All Holes Six Foot Deep

Day knew that it was an empty boast—empty because lawmen carefully avoided Cassidy's Crossing, in the hope that the natives of that dive would kill each other off or die of their own poisonous liquors.

As he slipped from the saddle in front of the Infierno he wondered amusedly if he would be the first law-dog to claim one of those six-foot holes. That, he thought, would be a good joke on Doc Bone. He bet that they'd rig him out in the best coffin in the place—and he only a rustler after all. The thought made Jack's cold smile warm spontaneously. In fact he seemed so pleased with himself his open grin gave the bartender a distinct shock when he strode up to the bar.

"What's the trouble, stranger," the

dour-faced, heavy barkeep accosted him. "Grinnin' ain't natural in Cassidy's Crossing!"

"So I see," Jack Day answered shortly, looking into the sour face of the whiskey-wrangler. "I was just thinking of what a nice box I'd get from old Doc Bone. And how friendly it'd be down there six feet under. Friendly when you match it against this place."

"Doc's best customers was gents who was too friendly," droned the barkeep dourly.

"It was the worms I was thinkin' of," Jack said, the grin shading slightly. "They'd be better company than the Crossing's welcoming committee."

"You ain't—" the bartender scowled. His beefy hands hovered out of sight beneath the bar.

"I ain't talking about you," Jack cut in pleasantly. "But about the bushwhacking skunks who shot my pardner in the back this morning. Is there a genuine sawbones in this hell-hole—or just a undertaker and a flock of poison-mongers?"

"There ain't no medico," the bartender said. "Doc Bone ain't fussy about his customers. He don't care if they're bandaged up or not." His puffy eyes closed shiftily. "You say, yore pardner . . .?"

"I don't remember mentioning names," Jack Day cut him short. "And since there ain't no sawbones I'll be on my way."

He turned his back on the bartender and started for the door when the slight body of a man loomed against the sunlight of the street. As the newcomer's bootheels clicked on the rough floor, Jack heard a slight movement behind him and suddenly swung half way around. The bartender was stooped half over behind the pine counter. In the mirror Jack Day could see him bring up a sawed-off shotgun.

"I'll have a drink first," Jack said. His words, his voice were casual enough, though his heart was beating strangely. He knew that he hadn't missed death by much. He thanked Lady Luck that the mirror was clean enough so he could see the little man walking across the room.

The bartender seemed paralyzed for a moment. Then he came up, his pig-eyes gleaming, his big hand twisting a towel that he'd grabbed from the under-bar.

The slight new-comer came up now and the whiskey dealer nodded to him. In the mirror Jack Day saw the little fellow's mild blue eyes, that were somehow hard and cruel, for all their ingenuous expression, and the deep droop of the gray mustache over the man's terribly thin jaw. The small gent was looking at him now with a peculiarly piercing gaze. Jack Day half turned. The long mustache jerked in wordless greeting. The bartender set two glasses and a bottle on the bar.

"Have a drink on me," Jack said to the little man. "And you, too!" He glanced at the bartender. "You fellers are a right cheery pair. Sort of warms up my feeling of generosity."

"Doc Bone, here, was just sizin' yuh up for that black box you come for." The barkeeper set another glass on the bar and filled it from the bottle. Jack Day could see no sign of humor in the man's heavy face.

"A prospective customer, huh?" Doc Bone's voice boomed hollowly. It was such a big and deep voice for such a wizened lean man that it seemed as if his wispy frame couldn't stand up under it's rumblings. "When do you expect to move in?"

"I don't!" Jack filled his glass and the Doc's until the liquor slopped over the top. Then he lifted his glass up level with his eyes, peering over the top into Doc Bone's pale blue irises. "The box is for the skunk who bushwhacked my pardner this morning. Let's drink to an early-

wormy grave for that polecat. And that you get the job, Doc."

The undertaker's eyes held steady. The bartender's hand trembled. But, as the liquor went down, Jack Day knew that he hadn't yet found the actual bushwhacker. That whiskey spiller was in on it, he was certain. Doc Bone, maybe. But the fat man would have used a shotgun or a knife. The undertaker would have killed from the front. He could see that in Doc Bone's pale eyes.

"I'll get the job." Doc Bone clicked the empty glass on the bar-top. "But you'll be the customer. What kind of box do you want? Cottonwood or pine?" The big mustaches curled over an odd little grin.

"I ain't sure," Jack Day answered quietly. "You got any idea where I'd be likely to find Blue Cassidy?"

"What you want of him?" the bartender cut in gruffly.

"It seems to me," Jack Day answered, "that I ain't got around to bringing up that subject yet. You know where I can find Cassidy?"

The bartender's round pig eyes drew tight at the corners. There was stark hatred burning there, dampened by fear.

"I'll go with you," Doc Bone said. "I want to be on hand when the time comes to lay you out."

Jack Day felt a queer prickling along his backbone. He turned, with a great show of ease, and walked to the door and out into the sunlight with the undertaker.

OUTSIDE Jack felt better, even though the ghostly haunting of little Doc Bone by his side still chilled him through all the heat of the day. He stood for a moment there in the sun by the open doorway. But Doc Bone took his arm and tugged him aside.

"I wouldn't stand there," the undertaker said, his powerful voice modulated to a rasping whisper. "It ain't healthy to stand in draughty doorways."

"It ain't," Jack Day admitted. His brow furrowed as he peered down into Doc's steady pale eyes. "But it oughta be good for yore business."

"It should be," Doc Bone admitted. That odd smile came back to his thin mouth. "But I deal in quantity, brother, not in quality. My guess is that if you ain't careless you'll bring me a lot of business before I have to dig you in."

Jack's forehead furrowed even more as Doc's matter-of-fact talk rasped in his ears. "What makes you think so?"

The undertaker shrugged his meagre shoulders. "You're fast with a gun and on a mad. You're after blood and plenty of it. You must of been mighty fond of that pardner of yours—if he was your pardner."

"He *is* my pardner," Jack Day said. "He ain't dead yet."

"Then you better ride and ride fast. You better take the old gent with you." The little man's faded eyes were fathomless. "Blue Cassidy don't like lawmen. That's why I stuck that sign on my door. Blue's been honing for law blood for a long time now. Blue's running a good business. He don't want to be bothered."

"What makes you think my pardner was a lawman?"

"There's ways of learning things like that." Doc Bone's eyes were fathomless. "I was on my way out to bring him in and measure him for a box. I seen you take him over to O'Leary's."

"Then you know who—"

"I don't know a damn thing. Blue Cassidy don't like people to know things." Then a lighter glow came into Doc Bone's eyes. "I sort of expected to get you, too, this morning when you rode up to O'Leary's. Old Bart is getting fed up on rustlers coming up the Pecos. They'd just as soon add a couple of his cows to

old John Starr's, and Cassidy ain't fussy at all. Bart O'Leary's sworn war on trespassers. Rifle slugs, Bart says, is the best feed for rustlers. He aims to set himself up in this neighborhood with a decent spread, if he has to kill every enemy of John Starr's to do it!"

"You don't think that he might of shot my pardner?" Jack Day asked coldly.

"He might of," the old man answered. "But when his gal didn't shoot you I figgered you was lawmen. Alice is one salty filly. As quick on the trigger as her old man—and as full of hate for rustlers."

The little man chopped off his last word with a click of his strong teeth. From the south of the town a buckboard was swinging around the high bluff.

Jack Day looked back from the approaching buckboard to the little undertaker. Doc Bone was staring off in the distance now, unperturbed, cold even under the hot sun.

"If I was allowed to know things," Doc Bone said, as if talking to himself, "I could tell a lawman a lot of amusing items. But I don't know a thing."

Jack Day stared down at the top of the man's head. Doc Bone sure was a queer one. There was no doubt at all that he, too, was mixed up in this nefarious business of Cassidy's Crossing. But something about the little man gave the lie to his cold-blooded talk. And something else convinced Jack Day that Doc Bone was on the level with him; that when the time came Doc would be on his side, lending his guns and his life in an effort to run down the bushwhackers of the old marshal.

"That's Bart O'Leary now," Doc Bone said as the buckboard swung down the street. "Alice is forking a horse behind him in the dust. She don't like riding the wagon."

"And you think he's my man?" Jack Day's voice came like a thin thread.

"I ain't allowed to think," Doc Bone answered.

THE buckboard swirled by and then drew to a halt in front of the two-storied Silver Palace. Bart O'Leary, a broad-shouldered, black-haired Irishman, lithe and fast for all his years, hit the boardwalk and slammed through the door into the honkatonk.

Little Doc Bone grasped Jack's sleeve and tugged. "There's going to be business for me," he said. "Come along and help me drag in the corpse."

Jack Day automatically braced his feet against the Doc's pull as he heard the rattle of hoofs behind him. For a moment he stood there irresolutely, then glanced up when the hoofs stopped. He was looking straight into the clean blue eyes of Alice O'Leary.

"I thought you'd be interested to know that your partner's picking up right fast," she said. Somehow she looked very lovely up there on top of the big horse. But even her beauty did not blind Jack Day to the tinge of sarcasm in her voice or the twist of scorn to her full lips. "I forgot to tell you out there that Cassidy's Crossing's only doctor cures by burying. But I suppose you know that. Your *partner*"—she emphasized that word—"is tougher than you thought. He come out of it and began raving just like you thought he would. Also, the old man found a bunch of Lone Star cows off on the corner of his range. What your partner said and that bunch of strays sort of matches up—in a funny sort of way." Her horse reared as she gently tickled its ribs with her big silver spurs. Her blue eyes flashed. "It all adds up, and makes skunk!"

Jack Day suddenly snapped out of the trance that the girl's talk had thrown him into. He reached for her horse's bridle. But old Doc, still clutching his arm, pulled

him back off balance and the girl on the horse roared off down the street.

"Take it easy, brother," Doc Bone whispered. "Running loco ain't going to help you any."

Jack Day shook off the undertaker, started at a clumsy run down the street toward the running horse. Doc Bone fell in behind him, caught up to him just as the girl ground to a stop in front of the Silver Palace, flung herself from the saddle and dodged inside.

"Foller at a walk!" Doc Bone urged. "Fellers who run into that place—they don't never last to run out again."

Jack Day shrugged, loosened the guns in their holsters. He didn't know why he did that, for consciously all he wanted to do was to get hold of Alice and find out what she was talking about. But the feel of the gun-butts in his hand eased his nerves, brought a smile to his young face.

"You with me, Doc?" he said softly. "I smell snake sign—plenty. Is this Blue Cassidy's headquarters?"

"Right," Doc answered. "And I'm with you. No shooting, though. We'll find out who bushwhacked your pardner. Maybe we'll find out—a lot of things!"

From inside the big honkatonk they could hear two men's voices raised in angry talk. The girl's voice chimed in once and her words came clear.

"He's out there talking to Doc Bone. He's the one who bushwhacked Starr."

"Your pardner—" Doc Bone's pale eyes bulged, "—is old John Starr?"

"Nope." Jack Day grinned. "John's brother, Tom. U. S. marshal."

"Good God! And that damn fool girl's spilled . . ."

"It don't matter," Jack said softly. "Us U. S. marshals don't need to hide. You coming with me?"

Doc Bone gave his answer by jerking at his gunbelt, by stepping ahead of Jack Day and pushing through the swinging door.

Jack Day was so tall he could see over the top of Doc's J. B. as he followed the undertaker into the honkatonk. He blinked his eyes. Four .45's in the hands of two big men bored towards him. Off to the right a fat bartender held a double-barreled shotgun across the bar. To the left a thin-faced gambler sat at his round table holding a sawed-off across his knees. And the girl had her hand on her holstered .38.

Jack Day grinned bleakly, standing there in the middle of the room.

"I guess I made a mistake," Doc Bone said softly. Then his lips turned up, too, in a strange ghostly grin. "Look what I found, Blue," he said to the man who had been arguing with Bart O'Leary. "Yuh might think this is a funny way for a feller to bring in a bushwhacker. But it worked, didn't it?"

Doc Bone stepped aside. Blue Cassidy's eyes were searching over the little undertaker. Bart O'Leary was scowling darkly. And the girl's beautiful face was creased with scorn. Doc Bone looked gloatingly up at Jack Day. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood on the Badge!

BLUE CASSIDY'S cold voice broke the silence. "Glad to have the pleasure of entertainin' yuh," he said.

Blue Cassidy was a big man, sure of himself. And on the breast of his fancy vest gleamed a bright star. Blue Cassidy was the marshal in the town that had been named after him. He was the law, and he looked every bit the part that he played. Crooked, heartless; as cold-blooded as the little man who did his burying for him, Blue had gotten his name from the icy chill of his eyes, from his blue-black beard that he let grow to hide his weak chin.

"Damn glad of it!" big Bart O'Leary put in.

"We don't like gents who bushwhack U. S. marshals," Blue added. "We don't like slick tinhorn rustlers, either. Too bad for you that you didn't hide those cows you stole off John Starr. Bart and me might of fought it out if he hadn't found them. Bart and me, thinking each other had done the job, might of got right ornery. Bart gets het up now and then over little things. It's a good thing you come in and surrendered like this. Bart might of let fly at you. Rustlers is his special hate—like bushwhackers are mine."

"And blarney-tossing skunks," the girl put in, "don't find no favors with me."

Jack Day looked over each man in his turn, glanced at the girl's scornful face, then back at Blue Cassidy.

"So," he said quietly, "what do you intend doing about it?"

"We got a nice rope," Blue Cassidy said. "Whether Starr dies or not we'll have to use that rope. Bushwhacking, successful or otherwise, is still bushwhacking."

"And then I suppose you'll go out and finish off this feller who you think is a U. S. marshal?" Jack Day said.

Blue Cassidy held his steady gaze. But the girl gasped, and said: "You seem to think we all got a white stripe down our back like you? But you'll find out otherwise when you do the sky jig."

Jack Day began to smile at that. He still couldn't quite savvy this town, where everybody from this fresh young girl to the wizened old undertaker seemed to think only of cold blood. But the girl's last crack didn't ring true to Jack Day. She seemed sincere enough about thinking that he had done the shooting. Yet her voice had cracked when she talked of the neck-stretching.

Jack didn't know much about psychology, or he would have understood the girl better. Disappointment is a harder thing to bear than hatred or murder lust. For a moment back there at the ranch the girl had thought that at last a white man had come to Cassidy's Crossing. But this good-looking young stranger was a bushwhacker and thief like them all!

"And that grin will wash off mighty fast when the rope spangs and yore neck cracks," Blue Cassidy said. "We're takin' yore guns, feller."

Blue Cassidy started toward Jack Day. The young puncher's weight moved forward to the balls of his feet.

"You better take 'er easy, Cassidy. You ain't got a shred of proof against me. You don't know that the feller out at O'Leary's is a marshal. You're just making a bunch of wild guesses."

"Not so wild," Bart O'Leary cut in. "He came to and told us who he was."

"And we knew that a marshal was on the way," Blue Cassidy said as if to clinch the argument. Then, realizing that he'd made a break, he tried to cover up. "We asked the governor of the territory to ship one in."

"And you think that this lying rustler that I picked up out there with the Lone Star cows is the man you asked for?" Jack Day laughed. "You taken his word? He give any proof?"

"He didn't have any," the girl said. "You lifted it when I was boiling the water. I seen you at it but didn't know what was up until afterwards."

Jack Day turned his head swiftly to look at the girl. Blue Cassidy was standing now about three feet from him with one of his big beefy hands out. Blue's guns were in their holsters now but the other shooting irons were still centered on Jack Day's brisket. The bartender's shotgun and O'Leary's .45's would both have to shoot by Blue now to get Day. The gambler's gun was in the clear. Doc Bone's

hog-leg was less than five feet away and aimed for Day's head.

"Let's have your guns," Blue said. "And no funny work."

A GRIN flashed across Jack Day's face as he suddenly jumped forward, slugged at Blue Cassidy, and sprang sidewise. The last move brought him directly behind the startled girl. The first one was the starting signal for a lead barrage that came at him from three sides. Little Doc Bone, who was closest to Jack Day, should have tallied him with his first shot. That was the chance Jack took—a chance that broke well for him when the dead-shot undertaker's gun flung its lead wildly over the puncher's head. The bartender's buckshot went wild, too, because Jack was too close to Blue Cassidy. And only one of Bart O'Leary's slugs came even near scoring. It ripped through Jack Day's vest, scraped along the side of two ribs.

And then, as quickly as it had started, the shooting stopped. Smoke rose from gun barrels in a thin acrid stream. Splinters of wood drifted aimlessly from new bullet holes in board ceiling. Blue Cassidy cursed.

Jack Day was directly behind the girl, backing toward the door. One arm was around the girl's waist, holding her close to him. The other hand held a six-gun steadily pointed in the direction of Blue's heart. The girl at that moment was too startled to struggle.

The girl shuddered. Jack could feel it through his curved arm.

"Just don't get too over-anxious," Jack said softly to the men who would have hanged him. "I'm on my way. But I'll be back to Cassidy's Double-Crossing, or whatever you call your town. I'll be back when I ain't got no snakes in tow like Doc Bone. That sure was a good one on me, Doc. But who's laughing now?"

"Maybe you," Doc said. "But not for long. I got yore box all measured. I can't leave it empty."

Jack's back was to the door now; the girl before him was beginning to struggle. He was only a few feet from freedom; but the men before him were maneuvering slowly around to get him from the rear when he dodged out. If the girl put up any kind of fight he'd be lost.

"You take it easy," he whispered into her ear. "Or I'll plug your old man."

The girl's body stiffened. Then Jack Day saw Bart O'Leary's eyes shift toward the door. He felt, rather than saw, the light inside the honkatonk growing dimmer. The line of vision from the bar mirror to the door was cut off because of the way the place was built, but he felt a very definite sense of danger behind him, and realized that it centered in the doorway.

Very slowly Jack Day turned until he could see the door. Because of the brightness of the sun outside he could not actually recognize the man who was standing there. But something about the gross body, about the glinting shotgun in the man's hands and the fat finger crooked around the triggers made Jack certain that this was the bartender of the Infierno.

"Okay," Jack said. "I'm quitting." Fleetingly he thought that this town must have been a bonanza for shotgun salesmen. He'd never before seen so many sawed-offs, or the people so willing to use them. And Doc Bone's business, too, must be good. "I guess you got me," Jack added as the bartender stepped forward.

Jack's gun began to sag down. His mind was working in lightning flashes while a lessening in the tension rippled through the room. Jack Day had no doubt that this newcomer was going to shoot him.

He let go of the girl, then, and stepped one pace away from her. As he expected she immediately turned around and faced him. Fear still lurked behind the dawning

victory in her eyes, scorn still snapped its fire there.

"I guess you're done," she said.

Jack Day smiled at her, though the shotgun was now prodding into his side. He saw Blue Cassidy closing in. Jack Day's ticket to hell was about to get another hole punched in it. . . .

IT HAD worked before. It might work again! Blue Cassidy was in a direct line of the shotgun's barrel. Only Jack Day's body intervened. The girl was far enough to one side so that if anything went wrong she would not be hit with buckshot. Jack had the choice of dying by the rope—or by lead. And he chose the shotgun.

With a movement as lithe and sudden as a couger's, Jack Day twisted free of the shotgun that prodded his ribs. In the same split-second he smashed up with his hand, knocking the sawed-off out of the startled bartender's hands. Buckshot smashed into the floor, and the recoil of the gun sent the second charge into the mahogany bar. The barkeeper by the mirror dodged and stayed down. Bart O'Leary yelled as a chunk of buckshot gouged his arm. Blue Cassidy, his .45 up, dove for Jack's back.

As Jack plunged forward he grabbed Alice O'Leary's arm and dragged her after him toward the door. The shotgunner jumped into the way. He had retrieved his empty scattergun and was clubbing it for Jack's head. Jack Day shot once—then again—for the big man's body. The clubbed weapon veered slightly, and while it might otherwise have smashed in Jack Day's skull, it only cut down across his arm and sent his Colt spinning into the air. The bartender collapsed. Jack hurdled him.

Bart O'Leary and Blue Cassidy were both shouting and running, but not shooting for fear of hitting the girl. On the way out she tripped over the bartender's prone body and Jack had to twist back and lift her. He held her in his arms as he ran through the door and hit the boardwalk. Then he flung her into her father's buckboard and jumped in after her.

It was just as Blue Cassidy came through the door that Jack Day cracked down with the loose end of the long reins. Blue began shooting then, firing methodically for the horses. But the animals had already been frightened, had reared and were frantically on their way down the road.

Now the girl was up in the seat beside Jack and fighting him. Blue Cassidy had forked her horse back there by the honkatonk and was doing his best to catch up to them. Jack Day pulled his second Colt.

"So help me," he gasped. "I'll drill you!"

The girl sat back, startled. Her blue eyes showed puzzlement, surprise. His eyes she could not read but something very cold in them chilled her.

"You take the reins," he said, "and swing the horses around towards your spread. I'll be busy for a minute. But don't try anything funny."

She opened her mouth as if to speak, then snapped it shut again. He passed the reins to her, and without another comment kneeled down between the seat and the dashboard and faced the rear. Down there he could watch the girl as well as the lone rider who was chasing them.

They were gaining slowly on Blue Cassidy. Bart O'Leary had always claimed that his buckboard mustangs could outrun anything in New Mexico. But far back in town a dust-pall, rising up to the bluffs that overhung the false-fronted buildings, showed Jack Day that a posse was already forming to run him down.

Carefully he leveled his gun. Carefully he triggered. The buckboard rocked. The girl screamed. But on the third shot Blue

Cassidy's horse folded up and died in the middle of the road, and Blue smashed down heavily plowing the dust.

The girl pulled in on the reins, hardly slowing the stampeded mustangs at all. Jack swung his gun slowly until it centered on her small waist. She gasped, loosened the reins, and he took them from her.

When he was sitting beside her again he suddenly began to laugh. She seemed subdued now but his laughter brought the fire back to her.

"What are you going to do with me?" she snapped.

"It's a problem to me, too!" he admitted. "That was what the laugh was for. When I saw the sun rise this morning I never would of thought I'd end the day by pulling a kidnaping."

The mustangs ran on toward the west, dragging the small buckboard along behind it like a tumbleweed in a norther.

"And look," Jack went on. "It's only sunset now. Who knows what'll happen before the next dawn comes."

"You'll probably kill another dozen men," she answered with scorn in her voice. "There's blood on that sun . . . the blood of the lawman you shot . . . and all the others."

"My own, too, pretty soon." He was silent then for a moment, looking straight ahead into the sunset. "But not yours."

"They'll hang you when they catch you. They'll never let you get away with this."

"I know that," Jack Day admitted. "But the feller who bushwhacked my pardner will go out first. I know who he is, now. We'll ask Tom Starr if I'm right."

"Then you admit that man you shot is a marshal?"

"That man I didn't shoot, you mean!" Jack laughed again. The girl was studying him intently as the buckboard bounced on over the rutty road. The sun was a crimson globe on the mountains to the west. "And this morning I was a rustler. But tonight I'm kidnaping a girl and toting a marshal's badge. Look . . ."

In a sudden spirit of bravado he took the golden shield from his pocket, held it up while the sun shone like blood upon it. Then he pinned it to the girl's calfskin vest above her heart. She sat there silently wondering.

"When I cash my last chip, you give that to Tom Starr. . . . Tell him what I done today. . . . And see what he says." He whipped the horses up to a fast run again. "Then see if you can think more kindly of me."

CHAPTER FIVE

Renegade Round-Up

IT WAS dark when they reached the barbed wire enclosing the little house in the cottonwoods. Above them the stars glittered brightly in a deep blue sky; behind them the sounds of half a hundred horse-hoofs rattled dimly on the road from town. There was no time to lose. If that posse caught up before Jack Day was ready for them, the mission that he'd taken over from the man who'd saved his life would be forever lost.

The girl unlocked the gate and stood back while Jack drove the team through and up to the barn. For the moment she had forgotten the necessity for fighting this cowpuncher whom she had called a skunk. She met him at the doorway. The hoof-thunder now rang in their ears.

"You come with me," he said. "Listen to what Tom has to say. But don't let him see that badge."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to ask him a question. Then I'm going out there and shoot a couple of people. I want you to know why."

She followed him into the darkened room where Tom Starr was stretched out on the bed. The old marshal moved his

head slightly as they entered. They could barely see him in the faint glow from the stars. Alice held her hand over the marshal's shining badge.

"Who . . ."

"It's me," Jack said softly. "The feller you pulled out of the creek."

"The feller who was rustling John Starr's cows?"

"The same!" Jack was standing close to the bunk. "You knew that . . ."

"O' course I did!" Old Tom Starr chuckled. "You think I've been a lawman for thirty years without knowing a rustler when I see one? But I was after bigger fish. I guess they got me first."

"They're coming back," Jack whispered. "Listen! Hear those hoofs? They're coming to hang me for bushwhacking you and kidnaping Alice O'Leary."

"I allus said that one crime leads to another," the lawman observed. "You're going fast, feller—damn fast! But you was too far away to bushwhack me. I was keeping my eye on you. You better murder somebody else."

"I'm going to," Jack said. "I'm going to kill Blue Cassidy."

The marshal raised himself up on one elbow. "You're not. I come a long ways to get Cassidy. I'm going to kill him, myownself."

"It's too late, pardner. He's on the way. Hear those hoofs? You get under the bed where you'll be safe. You're too old."

"Too old, hell!" the oldster snorted. "I'm stove up, maybe. But I'll fight with you. Too old, huh!"

He tried to push up to a sitting position but the exertion was too much for him. He gasped once, hard. The girl ran up to the bed just in time to catch his shoulder and ease him down. He lay there for a moment, panting.

"I guess you're right," he said after a moment. "But you give me a gun. I'll still show you some tricks." He noticed then that the girl was bending over him. He hadn't realized that she was there. The pain had been so great when she eased him down to the bed a moment before he hadn't known who had done it.

"The lovely lady!" he smiled "What do you think of yore young badman, now that you know he's a rustler? Also a kidnaper and a general nuisance?"

"I—" Jack Starr could see the flush rising to her cheeks even in the dimness of the light. "I haven't had a chance to think."

The pounding of the hoofs outside rose into a thundering roll. A couple of the men in the posse shot their hog-legs into the air. One little bunch of them let out a wild cowboy yell and in a great wave they surged around the barbed-wire enclosure until they had it surrounded.

In the momentary silence Bart O'Leary's voice rose in a harsh bellow: "Come out of there, cowboy, or I'll come in an' get you!"

"Let's smoke him out!" Blue Cassidy hissed. Blue had no desire to match guns with the young stranger.

"But my gal—"

The rest of O'Leary's rushed comment was drowned out in the first barrage of lead. From all sides Blue Cassidy's men began methodically to rake the building.

JACK DAY became aware of Alice O'Leary standing beside him, touching his arm with her hand. It sent a queer thrill through him, deafened him for a moment to the howl of flying lead and the roar of blasting powder.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You better lie down on the floor," he warned her. A bullet came whining past them and smashed into the glass globe of the unlighted lamp. "They'll get tired of this pretty soon and I'll go out after Cassidy. We can't shoot at them. We might hit your old man."

The girl hunkered down on the floor in the protection of the log walls, and clung closely to Jack Day while they waited. After a while the barrage let up. And again voices came through the night.

"You better come out, cowboy," Blue Cassidy yelled again. "You can't hold out. There's a couple of dozen of us out here."

"You come and get me!" Jack Day challenged.

"By God!" Somebody out there began to swear luridly. "I will!"

"That's Pop!" the girl whispered.

"Come on!" Jack Day hollered. He leaned closer to the girl who was still clinging to his arm. "We'll let him in. Then I can get Cassidy, and . . ."

"You'll be killed!" A strange tenderness came into her voice. "Keep bluffing them. I—"

She broke off as a dark shadow slid out from the mass of men before the gate and moved under the barbed wire. As the shadow merged with brush inside the enclosure the men outside began shooting. Apparently they were laying down a barrage to cover the advance of the man who was working his way in. The lead was coming in such a thick stream Jack Day did not dare try to answer it. His first shot would bring a dozen guns to bear on his pistol-flash.

Then, when the second barrage lightened, Jack moved over to the window that faced the gate. So quickly that it made one continuous pencil of flame he emptied his six-gun up to the last shot in the direction of the gate. The guns swerved over as he dodged back, ripped the window into a million glittering shreds of glass. And the man outside broke from the brush and began running for the door.

He hadn't taken three steps when he suddenly stumbled and fell flat on his face less than ten paces from the house.

Jack Day had been loading his gun when that happened. The girl screamed shrilly, leaped for the door. Jack tripped her up and pulled her back.

"For God's sake!" he said.

"My father, they—"

Jack's gun was full now. He saw the dark form in the yard jerk under the impact of a bullet. Swiftly he was out of the door, running.

Miraculously they didn't see him until he was already bending over the still body of Bart O'Leary. By that time two steady streams of lead were lashing out from the house. At the window the girl was triggering her carbine. Behind her the wounded old marshal was shooting over her head and driving the circling warriors to cover. Jack Day picked up the limp body of O'Leary. A bullet snapped his Stetson from his head.

And just as he reached the door another slug smashed through his thigh, pitching him heavily up against the building. He felt himself going sick. He felt the bite of wood splinters sprayed from lead that bit into the door jamb. And then the girl's small hand dragged him inside.

"You look after your father," he said. "I'm going back."

"No! No!" the words came in tight sobs from the girl's throat.

But Jack Day was already up on his feet. His left leg wouldn't seem to work. But his right was still okay. He could hop along on that. And he had a full load in his gun.

As he got to the door he sensed something strange happening outside there in the starlight. He heard, over the roar, the bark of a rifle out on the flat country. He didn't stop to figure it out. He was after Blue Cassidy's hide. Jack Day, the rustler of the morning, was giving his life for a lawman who had pulled him out of a river—and a girl who had once called him a skunk and had later nestled close to him while the bullets whistled about them.

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5 DIAMONDS

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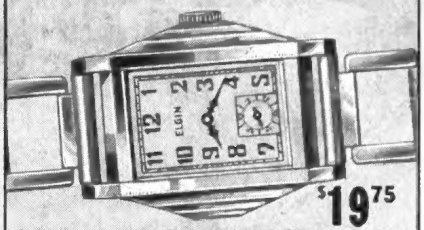

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NEW MODEL ELGIN $1.87 a month

KA-8 . . . The nationally famous ELGIN in a handsomely designed new, step-effect white case; fitted with a guaranteed dependable 7 Jewel ELGIN movement. Sturdy link bracelet to match. *Only* $1.87 *a month.*

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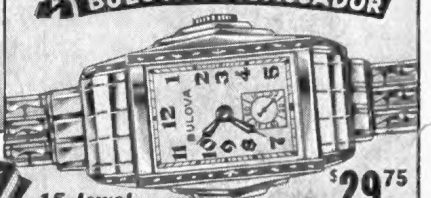

15 Jewel

$29.75

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KA-9 . . . One of the most popular BULOVA Gent's Wrist Watches and only $29.75. Distinctively designed and engraved rectangular shape case fitted with a 15 JEWEL B-U-L-O-V-A precision movement. Fully guaranteed to give lifetime service. New type close-link bracelet. *Only* $2.87 *a month.*